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***Conversation with an Apple: Play Development as Movement-Building  
Against Mass Incarceration***

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***Conversation with an Apple: Play Development as Movement-Building***  
**Against Mass Incarceration**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

For the young people of this world, so that, in solidarity and collaboration with you, we may nourish the vision and the courage necessary to build a world deserving of your wisdom and your goodness. Another world is possible.

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## **Abstract**

### ***Conversation with an Apple: Play Development as Movement-Building Against Mass Incarceration***

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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This reflective practitioner research project explores if and how viewing and responding to drafts of my original solo play in development, *Conversation with an Apple*, contributes to efforts to build a movement against mass incarceration, with a particular focus on dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. I draw upon Michelle Alexander's theorization of mass incarceration in the United States, social movement theory elaborated and archived by contemporary activists, and theories in performance and affect studies to contextualize my investigation. I describe how I utilized Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process to elicit audience responses to staged readings of *Conversation with an Apple*, and also how I employed modified grounded theory techniques to analyze those responses. I then explain how insights gained through these methodologies informed revisions of the *Conversation with an Apple* script and my plans for future post-show workshops. I conclude with an evaluation of the usefulness of these play development and research methodologies in my artistic practice.

I find that both Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process and the modified grounded theory analysis I utilized, along with a return to my guiding theoretical frameworks, contributed meaningfully to my reflective practice, yielding several key insights. First, I discovered that the play does seem to have the potential to raise consciousness among audience members regarding multiple manifestations of mass incarceration as it affects young people, although I decided that a few key mechanisms of mass incarceration might be more fully elaborated through script revisions. Second, I found that when audiences responded to the play, the shared experience of viewing the performance functioned as a springboard for conversation about other shared experiences in their lives, thus building a sense of community in at least a small way. I also theorize that the act of transmitting heightened affect together while viewing this play built community. Finally, my analyses revealed that although some audience members felt outraged at the realities of mass incarceration and inspired to make a change, many felt hopeless after viewing the play. These analyses informed my most significant revisions to the *Conversation with an Apple* script and plans for post-show workshops.

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## **Chapter One: Holding Hope**

### **INTRODUCTION**

A colleague asks me to perform something in a locally produced theatre festival, FronteraFest. He is looking for pieces to be shared during the portion that he's curating, Mi Casa Es Su Teatro, in which theatre-makers invite audiences to experience performance in their homes or in other unconventional theatre spaces. This colleague, Rudy Ramirez, says he'd be happy to help showcase a reading of the newer solo play that he had helped me with a few months earlier, or some of my older work too. He tags me on Facebook a couple of times, and emails me too. I thank him for the offer, and I thank him for thinking of me, but I don't quite commit.

I'm busy. I'm teaching. I'm happy to be working with my colleagues at arts education organization Creative Action again, in classrooms throughout central Texas most weekday mornings. I'm about to begin a new teaching artist residency at a group home, exploring racial and gender justice with young women in a program called "The Performing Justice Project." I'm trying to get more involved in local community organizing efforts, offering up my skills as an artist and an educator to movements for immigrant, worker, and prisoners' rights. I'm thinking about taking an intensive class in Restorative Justice that meets all day long every Saturday. I'm very busy. I keep myself busy doing things that feel like they really matter.

It's only after Rudy emails me with a note saying that he really wants to have more artists of color represented in the festival, and more political work too, that I finally commit. If I really can offer something unique and needed, I figure, then I should do so. I'll try my best.

I'll try my best to share the story of Ms. Eden, a new fifth grade teacher who struggles to keep hope alive during her first years of teaching, which just so happen to coincide with the first years of the Obama presidency. As she watches a beloved student and his family struggle, Ms. Eden is forced to come to terms with the stubborn persistence of racial inequities in the classroom and in the nation. While sharing stories from her classroom and stories of her and her

students' relationships to President Obama on a series of blind dates, she questions if and how change is possible.

It's a story that leaked out of me, one dribbling little drop of an image or an idea at a time, until about four months before this day. Then, encouraged by my friend, colleague, and dramaturge James McMaster during a residency in the University of Texas at Austin Lab Theatre, monologues suddenly came gushing onto the page. I was shocked to discover I'd written close to an hour of material; every other solo play I'd crafted was thirty minutes long, at most. I found I'd created an ode to all that I love and fear most in this world, and especially to what I found myself wanting and struggling to find the space to say in my academic writing, activism, and teaching. James helped me discover characters, settings, and conflicts, a compelling dramatic shape for these passions; Rudy offered some ideas for basic staging; and although I'd only shared a few excerpts of the work a few times, the friendly audiences who encountered it encouraged me to continue.

It's been a while since I've worked on this play, however. I initially applied to graduate programs with the intention of buying myself some time to focus intensively on my solo performance practice. Between the time when I initially selected multidisciplinary performance programs that interested me and this day, though, I found myself gradually drifting further and further away from my solo performance practice. It's become hard for me to believe that my solo performance practice is really worth the time and energy it usurps from me. I worry that it is self-indulgent, and even oppressive. I'm a practitioner of the Theatre of the Oppressed, after all, and Augusto Boal's and Paulo Freire's stinging indictments of the inherently oppressive nature of the monologue, as opposed to dialogue, are always echoing in the back of my mind.<sup>1</sup> And what is a solo performance but one big long monologue? And what could I – privileged in so many ways, and more privileged with each passing minute I spend pursuing a postgraduate

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<sup>1</sup> See "Conclusion: 'Spectator,' A Bad Word!" in Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* (154) and Freire's warnings about the dangers of substituting "monologue, slogans, and communiqués for dialogue" in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (65).

degree – what could I possibly have to say that’s really worth an hour of anyone’s time? If I’m concerned about the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration – and I am – then shouldn’t I focus on making space for the voices of the people most directly affected by these systems to be heard instead? That’s why I’m so drawn to more participatory forms of theatre-making with marginalized people, and marginalized young people in particular, after all.

After still more delays in my communication with Rudy, due to my reluctance to prioritize this aspect of my artistic practice, I invite the Mi Casa Es Su Teatro audience to the park right next to my apartment complex. There’s a little stage in the middle of the park that I hope will suffice. I cross my fingers and hope for good weather. Hopefully no one will decide to have a barbecue at the same time, too.

Yet again, I put off preparing for my reading until the last minute. The morning of the festival, I’m still pecking at my laptop, making edits here and there, trying to make sure my half-script, half-outline will be legible enough to keep me on track during the sections that I’m sure I will end up improvising. I find myself dreading the reading. There are so many other more useful, less oppressive things I could be doing. Is it too late to just read something someone else wrote instead? Why? Why did I commit to this?

Luckily, the weather is lovely. The sun is shining amidst cheerful puffs of white clouds in a bright blue sky. A friendly breeze rolls in, enough to ruffle the pages of my script, but unlikely to blow them away. I warn one family playing on the stage that a performance will be happening there soon, but luckily nobody’s out barbecuing. A small group of friends, colleagues, and committed theatregoers trickle in, perhaps twenty in all, and they take a seat on the edge of the stage and in the grass nearby.

I begin to read. I’m nervous. These people went out of their way to see me. They even paid money. I hope I have something to share that is worth their time. As I keep reading, making eye contact with several of the audience members intermittently, sharing jokes and laughter, I begin to feel more at ease. As I near the end of the piece, and as the script takes a turn towards grief, rage, and hopelessness, I’m surprised at the deep well of emotion that is tapped in

me. I remind myself that this protagonist is not me, though we do have some things in common. I suddenly feel like this is just me ranting and raving, though. What self-indulgence indeed. I hope this monologue isn't alienating the audience. My protagonist, Ms. Eden, wails, yells, and finally asks, pleading, then stone-faced:

What am I supposed to tell my children? My students?

They look at me and ask me what is true, and I've told so many children that the truth is that they are born wise and good, and they will remain wise and good, but only differently so, as they learn and grow, and teach me what is true, and...

I'm beginning to think it would be more kind to just tell them that this world was made to destroy them. And if they work hard and believe in themselves, then some of them will get lucky. And most of them will not. But it's not their fault. And very few people will ever believe that that is true.

When I make eye contact with audience members again, I am surprised to see that at least two of them are crying, and crying hard. Their noses are red and their eyes are puffy, like they've been crying for a while now. One of them hugs her friend for a long time after the play reading is over. One of them is a colleague of mine from Creative Action. I walk over to her to thank her for coming, and suddenly we're hugging too.

"I saw you crying teacher tears," I say. She nods. "You said all the things!" she exclaims through tears. "It's just – being in those schools. It's so hard. I want every teacher in the school district to see this. I want all the teaching artists at Creative Action to see this. I want this to be a mandatory part of our training. I want us to see this and sit down and talk about it. We have to talk about all of this, even when it's hard. And like you said in the play" – she's referring to the last line now – "we have to be brave. We owe it to the kids to be brave."

After chatting a bit more with audience members, I gather up my things and begin the quick walk back to my apartment. I'm surprised, to say the least. I'm tired. Crying always makes me tired. I'm grateful that Rudy kept pressing me though; otherwise I may have never shared the piece publicly again. Now I'm glad I did. Still, it sure would make my life simpler if

I could believe my solo performance practice wasn't really worth the time and resources it demands of me. I leave the reading not so sure I can keep believing that, though.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Over the past three years, I've attempted to understand the relationship between playmaking and movement-building. Through my reading and my own practice as a theatre-maker and teaching artist, I've tried to understand how playmaking and the building of social movements are similar, how they are different, how these processes can and do work together, and how, in my local context, playmaking and other performance processes might better support the work of community organizers and activists engaged in movement-building. I've explored this series of particular questions in hopes of answering two bigger questions, one very public and one quite personal: How can theatre and performance contribute to movements for social justice? What meaningful contributions can I offer to movements for social justice?

This reflective practitioner research project explores permutations of those two questions as well:

- How can viewing and responding to drafts of this solo play in development – *Conversation with an Apple* – contribute to efforts to build a movement against the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration?
  - How, if at all, does viewing and responding to the play raise consciousness among audience members?
  - How, if at all, does viewing and responding to the play build a sense of community among audience members?
  - How, if at all, does viewing and responding to the play inspire audience members to take action?
  - How else might viewing and responding to the play support efforts to build a movement against the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration?
- How else might viewing and responding to the play affect audience members?

I hope that this research, though specific to this particular play project, might also yield useful insights for anyone and everyone engaged in building and supporting movements for social justice, and particularly for those who seek to craft works of theatre and performance in support of such movements. I believe that deep understanding of what unique contributions theatre and performance make to social movements not only makes us better activists, it can make us better artists. This kind of investigation can aid theatre artists in understanding what makes theatre and performance exceptionally powerful in each and every context in which we act.

## **KEY TERMS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

Several key theoretical frameworks shape my articulation of these particular research questions. Implicit in these questions are specific theorizations of the school-to-prison pipeline, mass incarceration, movement-building, and the role of the arts and performance in movement-building. Below, I describe how I understand these terms, and share a bit of the story of how I've arrived at these understandings.

In doing so, I hope that this writing can help to raise awareness and deepen understanding of mass incarceration in all the communities of which I am a part – theatre-makers, artists, educators, activists, scholars, Chicana/os, Latina/os, and more. I wish to offer up opportunities to reflect upon the ways in which the various communities to which I belong are differently impacted by and implicated in mass incarceration. I also seek to share theoretical frameworks that have helped me to develop a deeper understanding of how revolutionary change takes place, and how the arts and performance can and do play a role in such change, with the faith that others who work to make this world more just may also find these frameworks useful in deepening their own analyses and strengthening their work. Finally, I aspire to offer theatre-makers and other artists some language that can help them to understand their own power and responsibility; hopefully this writing will offer theatre-makers and other artists language that will



help them to communicate the unique power of their work to the communities in which they practice.

### **Mass Incarceration and the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

By “mass incarceration,” I refer to the hyper-incarceration of people of color and working-class people in the United States, and also to incarceration rates that are higher in the US than anywhere else in the world (King). I seek to understand mass incarceration as Michelle Alexander theorized it in her landmark text, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, as the mechanism through which the United States’ racial caste system has reformed so that it continues to function even in the age of supposed colorblindness, when a Black man can be elected president (11-13). Indeed, Alexander argues that this new racial caste system depends upon the exceptional rise to power of a relatively small group of people of color, such as Barack Obama, to create the appearance of racial justice while the current systems that perpetuate injustice continue to do so (274). Alexander is careful to assert that mass incarceration is not merely the result of a system of crime control operated by some people with some bias (15); rather, mass incarceration functions as a “cage” composed of multiple policies or “wires” that work together to imprison people of color en masse (Young qtd. in Alexander 203). It is not a system of crime control; it is a system of social control (Alexander 208). Alexander argues that mass incarceration even increases rather than decreases the amount of violent crime in communities of color and working class communities most affected by the system (194, 260). This system disproportionately targets and punishes people of color for drug crimes in particular which occur at roughly equal rates among all racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Alexander 17). Due to mechanisms of control that occur even outside of prisons such as lengthy and stringent probation requirements, parole requirements, employment discrimination, housing discrimination, and more, the punishment is endless; it creates a permanent underclass (Alexander 109-10, 205-6). It is a system that has immunized itself against attack (Alexander 157). It will take much more than reform to end mass incarceration in the United States. This

system of social control will only be undone by a revolutionary movement for social justice (Alexander 284). When I ask if and how viewing and responding to *Conversation with an Apple* raises consciousness among audience members, I want to know if and how they walk away from the performance and subsequent discussion with some heightened understanding of mass incarceration as a racist system of social control – a new formation of the United States’ racial caste system built to function in an era where explicit racism is generally frowned upon.

*The New Jim Crow* focuses primarily on the experience of African American men in the criminal justice system; however, Alexander acknowledges that women, Latinos, and immigrants suffer in ways that are distinct and important. She observes that in some instances, these groups are particularly vulnerable to some of the system’s worst abuses. Alexander offers an invitation to other thinkers to pick up where her text leaves off (27). I hope my play *Conversation with an Apple* responds to this invitation in at least a small way, shining a light on mass incarceration’s multiple effects on Latino boys in our schools, especially those with immigrant families of mixed citizenship status, and on the people who care about them. I chose this focus partly because I began to wonder if shining a light on the experience of Latino boys in schools in mixed citizenship-status families might illuminate the workings of multiple manifestations of mass incarceration often not discussed in the same circles.

I first became aware of one manifestation of mass incarceration through my collaborations with local activists organizing against the detention and deportation of immigrants.<sup>2</sup> I was shocked and horrified when I learned of the conditions in immigrant detention facilities run by private corporations making millions of dollars in profit. After attending a symposium on mass incarceration organized by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), I began to understand mass incarceration as a many-headed hydra, with tentacles reaching into communities of color, working-class neighborhoods, immigrant communities, our hospitals, our schools, and even into our own hearts, normalizing hate and fear rather than

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<sup>2</sup> See Maria Luisa Cesar’s “Protestors demand closure of Karnes residential facility” in the San Antonio Express-News for a description of one example of these collaborations.

forgiveness and understanding. As Grassroots Leadership director Bob Libal put it during his introduction to this ACLU symposium, through mass incarceration, the United States responds to a wide range of problems – violence, unemployment, poverty, addiction, mental illness, and international refugee crises – by warehousing the dispossessed in cages rather than by sharing resources that might aid one another in healing. I eventually came to understand, as Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow*, that we are far more likely to respond to people of color, particularly black men, in this way (Alexander 17-18).

In meetings with activists collaborating with Grassroots Leadership, Texans United for Families, and the Austin Immigrant Rights Coalition to organize against immigrant detention and deportation, I began to recognize how mass incarceration's influence on our hearts and minds placed major constraints on our own public discourse. For example, when crafting our talking points, we emphasized the innocence of people in detention centers. When selecting which campaigns for an individual's release we should take on, we chose to campaign for undocumented immigrants with no criminal record, believing that we'd be more likely to succeed by investing our limited resources in such cases. This troubled me, as our strategies seemed to imply that only the totally innocent deserve to live outside of prison cells. I was coming to understand more deeply, however, what Michelle Alexander articulates so well, that "All people make mistakes. All of us are sinners. All of us are criminals. All of us violate the law at some point in our lives" (238). I concur with Alexander's reminder that "Screwing up – failing to live by one's highest ideals and values – is part of what makes us human" (239). I believe we all deserve second chances, the opportunity to attempt to make amends, regardless of citizenship status, and regardless of race.

What's more, I began to recognize implicit and explicit anti-Black racism in the public discourse of many immigrant rights organizations. When immigrant rights activists urged police departments to invest their resources in arresting "dangerous criminals" rather than immigrants, I feared this would be interpreted as an encouragement to double down on the incarceration of Black communities ("Let police pursue"). I even witnessed some immigrant rights supporters

say quite explicitly that linking the Black Lives Matter movement with their own struggle was a “disgrace” to the immigrant cause, since those involved in Black Lives Matter protests and those shot by police had committed crimes. Michelle Alexander explains that the conflation of Blackness with criminality is both a cause and a product of mass incarceration as it exists today (123). I believe that the conflation of Blackness with criminality and the intense stigmatization of criminality are toxic; they are major impediments to building effective alliances to end mass incarceration. I also believe the conflation of Blackness with criminality and the intense stigmatization of criminality are simply wrong, regardless of their impact on alliance-building or movement-building.

I do want to note that Latina/o, immigrant, and Afro-descendent identities are of course not mutually exclusive. In the local context where I work, due to the most common migration patterns in central Texas, Afro-Latina/o and African immigrant populations are not as visible in elementary and secondary schools as mestiza/o and indigenous Latina/o immigrant populations. Partly because of this, in this project, I have chosen to focus on stories of immigrant experiences I’ve seen and heard most. However, Afro-Latina/o and other African immigrant populations also face unique and significant manifestations of oppression. In fact, even in immigrant detention facilities, Black immigrants are overrepresented (“The Real Crime”).<sup>3</sup>

Many of the immigrant rights activists with whom I’ve collaborated are keenly aware of these analyses and these obstacles. However, they seem to feel limited by the biases and prejudices of the people they are trying to mobilize in support of immigrant communities. I began to wonder if I might collaborate with these activists not only by staging performances at their public actions and leading workshops at their retreats, but also by creating works of art in other spaces that could challenge the prevalent biases and prejudices that imposed limitations on the activists’ ability to speak the full truth of mass incarceration. Because of this, when I ask if and how viewing and responding to *Conversation with an Apple* raises consciousness among

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<sup>3</sup> See The Black Alliance for Just Immigration’s “The Real Crime” for an important analysis of mass incarceration from African-American and Black immigrants’ perspectives.

audience members, I also want to know if and how audiences leave with some increased understanding or curiosity about the harm that the intense stigmatization of being labeled a criminal can inflict, and about anti-Black racism in Latina/o communities.

My growing understanding of mass incarceration left me hungry to comprehend how it affects my work as a teaching artist in schools. I wanted to understand how mass incarceration impacts young people in our schools, and how I am implicated as a teaching artist who teaches both students and their teachers. This of course led me to research the workings of the school-to-prison pipeline. Some who comment upon and organize against the school-to-prison pipeline focus primarily on high-stakes testing and zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and how they work together to push youth of color out of schools and into the criminal justice system.<sup>4</sup> I agree that these policies are central mechanisms of the school-to-prison pipeline. I believe it is also important to note, as critical pedagogue Noah DeLissovoy argues, that implicit in these policies is a construction of young people – and particularly young people of color – as potential risks to society who need to be disciplined by the state, rather than as human beings with vital assets to contribute to their communities. Furthermore, I’m interested in understanding the school-to-prison pipeline in the broader context of mass incarceration, in which young people are affected not only within their own schools but also when the adults who care for them are targeted for incarceration. Additionally, after study in cultural theory in education, I’ve come to believe that the lack of cultural competence and culturally relevant teaching practices among our teaching force is also to blame. When educators create curricula with few meaningful connections to students’ lives, and build classroom cultures that are not welcoming to young people or their families, we participate in pushing them out of our schools. I hope this play will raise consciousness regarding the difficulty of teaching in ways that resist the school-to-prison pipeline in our current school systems.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Test, Punish, and Push Out* by the Advancement Project.

I also want to note that, by centering the experience of Latino boys in my analysis in this play and the accompanying research project, there is a danger of further marginalizing Latinas and women of color. I don't take this risk lightly. I've arrived at this focus only after significant investigation into my own positionality as a Latina and woman of color. Research on how class and gender formations interact in school settings left me curious about how my own socialization as a girl may have offered me some advantages growing up in schools, and how that socialization may have impacted my work as an educator. In her ethnography of working-class girls *Women without Class*, sociologist Julie Bettie theorizes that "the social pressure for girls to conform and follow rules as a part of the definition of femininity makes it a possibility that they might do better in school than working-class boys, for whom defining manhood includes more pressure to engage in risk-taking behavior and overt resistance to control" (143). This theory led me to wonder if and how, as an educator, I've failed working-class boys by unthinkingly replicating demands for conformity and passivity in my classroom. These demands were, perhaps, relatively easy for me to comply with when I was in school thanks to my socialization as a girl; however, working-class boys may view such demands as threats to their identities. By punishing working-class boys' small acts of resistance in the face of these demands, I and my play's protagonist alike perhaps participate in pushing young boys out of school. I entered into this research hoping that performing *Conversation with an Apple* could make this mechanism of the school-to-prison pipeline more visible to audiences as well.

My primary research question asks if and how viewing and responding to *Conversation with an Apple* might contribute to building a strong movement against mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline. Up until this point, I've discussed some of the ways that I hope viewing and discussing the play might raise consciousness of these systems of oppression among audience members. However, my secondary research questions imply that there is more to movement-building than consciousness-raising. I also ask if and how viewing and responding to the play might build community, and inspire audiences to take action. Below, I describe theories of movement-building, performance, and affect that have led me to believe that building

community and inspiring people to take action are important components of movement-building that I could contribute to meaningfully by sharing this play.

### **Movement-Building and the Arts**

My understanding of movement-building is deeply influenced by the writings of strategists with Training for Change, an activist training organization primarily based in West Philadelphia, and also by the archive of creative activist theory, tactics, and case studies assembled in the book and web toolbox *Beautiful Trouble*. I seek to understand social movements as articulated by activist, Training for Change strategist, and *Beautiful Trouble* contributor Daniel Hunter, as “forces of collective energy, channeling deep emotions like anger and love and mobilized by hopes and dreams for large-scale change” (5).

However, it is difficult for me to hope and dream of large-scale change without understanding how such change could realistically come about. As one activist anonymously quoted in Hunter’s *Building a Movement to End the New Jim Crow: an organizing guide* said, “If I don’t believe I have the power to change something, then I won’t think about it” (35). Here, I find long-time activist and Training for Change co-founder George Lakey’s five-stage strategic framework articulated in “Strategizing for a Living Revolution” to be particularly useful in helping me to understand how large-scale change might come about. As Lakey promises it can, this strategic framework offers me a container in which vision, the stuff of hopes and dreams, can flourish.

Lakey is careful to caution that the revolutionary stages as he delineates them are overlapping and over-simplified; however, he offers them up as hard-won lessons from organizers across the globe that might assist US activists, notorious for our historical amnesia, in particular. The stages are 1) cultural preparation, 2) organization-building, 3) confrontation, 4) mass political and economic noncooperation, and 5) parallel institutions. Lakey defines them as follows:

- 1) ***Cultural preparation:*** What some call politicization, consciousness-raising, *conscientización* in Spanish or, I would add, *conscientização* in Portuguese as theorized by Paulo Freire. This stage is about a collective and cultural shift away from internalized oppressions, and towards visions of a more just world and the strategies that might bring that world into being. In keeping with my own politicization process as a feminist, I mostly call this consciousness-raising in my research questions and throughout this document.
- 2) ***Organization-building:*** What happens when politicized individuals join together to begin to bring their vision of a more just world into existence, to begin to enact their strategies. Lakey names a few examples of promising organizational forms – alternative institutions, ongoing affinity groups, transformational networks, and radical caucuses – and cautions activists against common pitfalls.
- 3) ***Confrontation:*** Highly public, highly visible acts of resistance by organized groups of people fuel rapid growth of the revolutionary movement. When people who have yet gone through the cultural preparation process view these public confrontations, they have the opportunity to decide whose side they are on. If activists have done their job well, the choice will be easy, and massive amounts of people will join the movement. The movement begins to take on a life and momentum of its own. This facilitates the transition to Stage Four. Lakey cautions that many attempts at revolutionary movement-building fail in this stage, and offers up advice for navigating this stage successfully.
- 4) ***Mass political and economic noncooperation:*** Strikes, boycotts, mass civil disobedience. The state and the economy are no longer able to function. This may seem unrealistic to some readers, but it has already occurred throughout the globe a number of times; Lakey describes instances in Argentina, Iran, and Burma in “Strategizing for a Living Revolution.” I might add mid-twentieth century India and multiple recent uprisings of the Arab Spring to that list. One might argue that this



occurred on a smaller scale throughout the Southern United States during the Civil Rights Movements that ended Jim Crow segregation as well.

- 5) ***Parallel institutions***: Parallel institutions grow from the seeds planted in the organizing stage, and assume power from the bottom – as opposed to a Leninist statist model in which society is restructured from above – in the power vacuum created by Stage Four. Without cultural preparation, organization, and parallel institution-building, confrontation and mass political and economic noncooperation cannot result in long-term, large-scale, systemic transformation; without Stages One, Two, and Five, after Stages Three and Four, we will simply return to our old habits and structures of oppression, albeit perhaps reshaped in a new form. Lakey cites Burma after a 1998 uprising as an example. The reemergence of a racial caste system in the US, this time organized and reproduced through mass incarceration rather than through slavery or Jim Crow segregation as Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow*, may exemplify what Lakey warns of here as well.

When I first encountered this five-stage framework, I made a list of the ways the arts can contribute meaningfully during each phase, based largely on my own experiences as a producer and consumer of the arts, and augmented by social movement theory created by activists and by what I'd learned in my own recent experiences collaborating with community organizers. I realized that works of art could aid in cultural preparation, telling compelling stories of oppression, resistance, and also opening spaces where we might imagine better worlds. I thought of the strong bonds of friendship so quickly forged between my collaborators and I almost every time we create something together, and reasoned that such bonds could be very important in organization-building; making art together could help strengthen the relationships necessary for organization-building. Responding to art together might serve that function as well; I remembered times when watching a play or movie with people I didn't yet know well gave us a shared experience to discuss which then served as a springboard into deeper conversations about our own lives and experiences. When it comes time for Stages Three and Four, confrontation

and mass political and economic noncooperation, I realized that much of Lakey's advice on navigating from Stage Three to Four successfully was aesthetic. Activists must consider their audience when designing a public action, and find ways to frame the story of the confrontation so that, no matter what happens, whether activists achieve their demands or not, the story's telling will attract more people to the movement. Much of *Beautiful Trouble's* archive of principles, theories, and tactics of creative activism, in fact, focuses on this point exactly.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the success of Stage Five – building parallel institutions – depends so heavily on Stages One and Two – cultural preparation and organization – that I believe it cannot truly be separated from them; therefore, the role of the arts in Stages One and Two remains crucial in Stage Five.

Lakey's strategic framework aids me in understanding and articulating how the various artistic, pedagogical, and activist practices in which I engage might contribute differently to movement-building. For years, my work lived primarily in Lakey's Phase One – cultural preparation. My work as a solo performer and as a teaching artist in schools affected people's knowledge, attitudes, and perhaps their discourse, but I rarely consciously strove to mobilize anyone to organize or confront the powers that be. I found myself hungry to participate in Lakey's Stages Two and Three, organization and confrontation, however. Because of this, I began volunteering with groups organizing campaigns in support of immigrant, worker, and prisoner rights. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that my skills as a cultural activist – an educator and artist – were in high demand among those working for concrete and not only ideological change. Organizers could not effectively organize or confront oppressive institutions without constant and ongoing cultural preparation work. Doing that cultural work in dialogue with organizers, however, gave me a sense that my work had greater meaning and potential for large-scale and long-lasting impact. *Conversation with an Apple* is the first solo piece I have

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the following principles in the *Beautiful Trouble* toolbox: "Know your cultural terrain," "Make the invisible visible," "Make your actions both concrete and communicative," "No one wants to watch a drum circle," "Play to the audience that isn't there," "Put your target in a decision dilemma," "Show, don't tell," "Stay on message," "The real action is your target's reaction," "Think narratively," "Use the power of ritual," and "Use your cultural assets."

created with these new understandings of movement-building and the arts in mind, and this project is, in part, an experiment in how these theoretical frames affect my practice, and the ways I listen to and understand audience responses to my work.

I've found that I cannot fully understand how my work as a performing artist might contribute to movement-building efforts without drawing upon theories and research specific to performance, however. Below, I describe theorization in performance studies that I've found most useful in enhancing my understanding of movement-building.

### **Performance, Affect, and Movement-Building**

I find performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's theorization of "The Politics of Passion" and feminist philosopher Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* essential in understanding how theatre and performance may contribute to movement-building. Earlier, I cited Daniel Hunter's definition of social movements as "forces of collective energy, channeling deep emotions like anger and love and mobilized by hopes and dreams for large-scale change" (5). Lakey's strategic framework offers a potential container for envisioning large-scale change and how it might come about; for me, Lakey's framework holds a space in which audacious hopes and dreams may grow. What is this collective energy, though? How is it channeled? What do theatre and performance have to do with these processes? Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* and Taylor's "The Politics of Passion" offer some answers.

Taylor defines "the politics of passion" as "the mobilization of affect for political ends on collective, structural, and trans-ideological levels that skirt the traditional organization of political parties and practices (such as lobbying and voting)" ("Politics of Passion"). In other words, Taylor, like Hunter, recognizes that movement-building involves the channeling of energy and mobilization of deep emotions for change beyond the current political realities. Taylor draws upon Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* to define "affect" and articulate how it functions. I find that a closer look at Brennan's work offers me names and rationale for phenomena that I have felt in my work as a performer for many years, but have struggled to

articulate and explain. Taylor's analysis of activist street performance by Mexican political cabaret artist Jesusa Rodríguez also aids me in understanding how the performer's skill in channeling heightened affect, among other skills, might prove useful in movement-building.

Brennan argues "all affects, including even 'flat affects,' are material, physiological things" (6). To put it another way, affects are not some imagined, ethereal, abstract phenomena. Brennan cites neurological research indicating that, instead, when an affect is transmitted from one person to another, it is because we release and breathe in one another's pheromones. This triggers a number of hormonal and neurological responses within us (Brennan 9). Because of this, Brennan explains, "the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject" (1). I have often described the energy in the air during a captivating performance as "electric." Brennan's framework suggests that, to some extent, this is true. When we transmit affect, we breathe each other in, and the electrical signals within our brains and bodies are changed. This suggests that "we are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the 'individual' and 'the environment'" (Brennan 6). This assertion poses dramatic challenges to individualist understandings of our identities and experience. It means that whenever we gather, the affects that pass through us are never solely our own. We sense and feel as collective beings.

Brennan distinguishes between the terms "affect" and "feeling," however. She defines "feelings as sensations that have found a match in words" (Brennan 19). Although many people gathered together may sense an affect together, they may name it differently depending on their experience and socialization (Brennan 12). This means that some individuals in a room full of people may understand a heightened energy in the air as anxiety, while others will understand it as excitement, for example. This helps explain why and how different members of a theatrical and/or political audience might experience the same event, sense the same affect, but express very different feelings.

What does this theory of affect have to do with performance and movement-building? I find some generative possibilities in Diana Taylor's interview with Jesusa Rodríguez in "The Politics of Passion" regarding her work "staging" activist street performance:

I asked Jesusa what, from her experience as a cabaret artist, had prepared her for this task of choreographing an entire political movement. Judging from her response, cabaret might indeed be essential training for politics... She... stressed the quality of bodily presence – developing a deep focus and connection to the people and place around her, allowing herself to become a body of transmission for the energy that moves in and through her to the crowd... The enormous power of embodied protest stems from this unconstrained flow of energy and affect – the expansion and constant regeneration of the body politic. ("Politics of Passion")

Although I know of no research in neuroscience corroborating that some people, particularly those who train as performers, are better at transmitting heightened affect than others, my experience as a theatre artist and educator certainly suggests that this is true. If, as Jesusa Rodríguez also suggests, this is indeed the case, and if, as both Taylor and Hunter posit, the channeling of certain types of energy, affect, and emotion are essential in movement-building, then those of us trained as performers have crucial roles to play in making change. We are vessels for the flows of energy that can change the world.

The theoretical frameworks I described above have deeply shaped my research questions and my methodology in this project. I ask if and how viewing and responding to *Conversation with an Apple* raises consciousness, builds a sense of community, and inspires audiences to organize and/or mobilize because I view these functions as crucial in movement-building, and because I believe that the arts – and theatre and performance specifically – can and do impact people in these ways. Furthermore, I bring people together to experience heightened affect because I believe that the transmission and channeling of intense affect is also crucial in movement-building.

I hope that this play in particular, in addition to raising consciousness about the workings of the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration as I described above, also raises consciousness about how revolutionary social change happens. In *Building a Movement to End the New Jim Crow*, Daniel Hunter argues that prevalent myths about social movements and social change make “us look externally, whether for the heroic leader, the right circumstances, or the big mass action. But movements are most effective when we look inward and find the strength in ourselves and our relationships” (7). Although *Conversation with an Apple*’s protagonist does not articulate social movement theory in detail, I do hope that her frustrations and transformations suggest that change does not happen stemming from just one person working from a position of power – be that President Obama, the teacher at the front of a classroom, or a potential romantic partner met on a blind date; instead, change takes place when we work together and understand ourselves as collective beings. To put it another way, I hope that viewing and responding to Ms. Eden’s journey will help audiences dispel the myth of revolutionary social change led by heroic individuals, and inspire them to look towards themselves and one another instead.

I entered into this research project curious how viewing and responding to this play might build community among a variety of audiences. Influenced by Brennan’s assertion that “we are not self-contained” (6), I understand “community-building” as a process in which a person comes to understand that they are part of something bigger than themselves. Before beginning this reflective practitioner research project, I hypothesized that even audiences who don’t particularly identify with the experiences of any of the characters in the play might still be able to use it as a touchstone for conversation; I theorized that such audiences may form some sense of community simply through the experience of transmitting and perceiving heightened affect together. I began this research hoping that this play can serve as a community-building tool among educators in particular, however. Despite the critiques I make of the educational system and of mainstream teaching practice, I do have great admiration for teachers and teaching artists. I believe that many educators teaching in historically underserved schools struggle because they

are asked to confront and resolve complex social problems alone. Teachers see the fall-out of a racist and deeply unjust society when students arrive in their classrooms too tired and stressed to learn easily in a classroom of twenty or more other students. I insist that this is a collective challenge that we all must solve, not only that individual teacher's challenge. However, many teachers are asked to face that challenge alone in the classroom each and every day. I initiated this reflective practitioner research process wishing that, if nothing else is achieved with this project, educators who watch and discuss Ms. Eden's struggles in this play will know that they are not alone. I hoped then, and still hope, that educators will find that the *Conversation with an Apple* performance space is a place where the emotional complexities of teaching are acknowledged and honored.

Finally, I began this reflective practitioner research wanting audience members leave *Conversation with an Apple* inspired to play some role in movement-building against mass incarceration and/or the school-to-prison pipeline. I know that there are a variety of roles that any one person can play in various stages of movement-building, however, so I do not believe that acting as a conscious agent of change has to look any one particular way. Educators, for instance, might participate in cultural-preparation by considering possibilities for what and how they teach in their own classrooms; or, they might consider organizing and mobilizing with colleagues outside the classroom, thus pursuing later stages in Lakey's framework. In this work, I do not attempt to measure whether or not audience members actually make change, or whether they try to, as I believe that what audiences do after they leave the performance space is influenced by so many factors outside of what they experienced there that it would be extremely difficult to make a strong causal link between their future actions and the experience of viewing and responding the play itself; I've simply hoped that immediately after seeing and responding to the play, audience members feel inspired to make change.

All that being said, I do recognize that not everyone understands movement-building in the ways that I have come to adopt. Because of that, and also because the play may influence audiences in ways I cannot imagine or anticipate, I incorporated a number of very open-ended

questions to audience members and a modified grounded theory analysis of their responses into my play development and research methods, as I explain in more detail below.

## **PLAY DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES**

This is reflective practitioner research, which means that I seek to learn primarily from reflection on my own experience as I engage in my practice. I also share and draw upon theory from relevant fields as I formulate my research questions and seek to better understand my own experience. In this particular playmaking project, these fields include legal scholarship, cultural studies in education, social movement theory, performance studies, and affect studies, as described above. I also utilize Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process and modified grounded theory methodologies in both my play development and research processes. In fact, because this research methodology investigates and serves my artistic process, in many respects, my play development process *is* my research process. The two are very closely linked. I sometimes envision my critical reflective research and creative performance practice as two alternating phases in one cycle that repeats indefinitely. I describe my play development and research methodologies in more detail and explain how and why I selected them below.

I developed my first draft of *Conversation with an Apple* in collaboration with dramaturge James McMaster and director Rudy Ramirez. In initial conversations with McMaster, I expressed my desire to contribute to public discourse around immigration policy, mass incarceration, education, the social construction of youth, and more. As I alluded to above, I viewed my solo play in progress as an opportunity to attempt to shift attitudes about guilt, innocence, and punishment, and to expand audience members' knowledge of the multiple facets of mass incarceration in the US.

As I came to understand that people labeled as criminals are permanently punished in the US for their perceived guilt, I simultaneously came to understand that many children's analyses of their worlds and political demands are often dismissed because of their perceived naivety and innocence. My work developing and facilitating an interactive performance residency about



community organizing histories and principles for ten- and eleven-year old students left me deeply inspired by my students' uncompromising analyses of injustice and their bold and loving visions for better futures.<sup>6</sup> I was troubled, however, that my students' commentary was not a regular part of public discourse. At the same time, as I learned more about mass incarceration in the US, I realized that, if nothing changes, an unconscionable number of my students will eventually be pushed out of school and sent to live in cages. That thought was unbearable to me. I wanted more adults to view young people as possessing unique and important assets that they contribute to their communities, not as risks to be managed. I desperately wanted to share something of the effect that engaging in dialogue with young people about the world's problems and their potential solutions had on me, as those were the experiences that convinced me so fully that young people do indeed possess unique and vital assets, but it was important to me to do so without compromising their privacy or confidentiality. McMaster and I agreed that a fictionalized rather than ethnographic performance would best support my goals of placing young people's analyses and visioning in the classroom in conversation with the contemporary realities of mass incarceration in the US.

In 2013 and 2014, I shared versions of *Conversation with an Apple* with three small audiences; these sharings consisted primarily of minimally staged readings of a series of written monologues. The first reading took place in the Lab Theatre in September 2013. Dramaturge James McMaster facilitated a short talkback session with an audience of graduate student colleagues after the reading. Next, I read select scenes at the Flor de Nopal Literary Festival in December 2013. Shortly after that, I shared a revised draft with a small audience of theatre-lovers in a park near my home at the Mi Casa es Su Teatro portion of FronteraFest in January 2014, as described in the introduction to this chapter. After each of these readings, I reflected informally on audience responses to the piece and made revisions to the play after each one, but had not yet articulated the research questions described above or the more detailed research

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<sup>6</sup> See Creative Action's blog, <https://tapstories.wordpress.com/category/courage-in-action/>, for more stories about this interactive performance residency program.

protocol described below. I explored themes addressed in the play through my scholarly and creative writing/performance-making in several graduate courses, but did not end up incorporating that writing/performance directly into the play.

In January 2015, I resumed my play development process with more focused attention on the research questions elaborated earlier in this chapter. I shared drafts of the play with community members differently affected by and implicated in mass incarceration in the US: educators, including both classroom teachers and teaching artists who work in afterschool programs and short-term in-school residencies; and activists organizing against mass incarceration in the US, including and especially those organizing against the school-to-prison pipeline. I planned to share the piece with young people and families directly affected by mass incarceration/the school-to-prison pipeline in the US as well, but found that time and logistical constraints were too great for the current scope of this project. I've listed these groups as separate here, but I want to note that they do of course overlap.

I recruited these audiences from my local networks via email, asked them to respond to my play, and then analyzed their responses in order to begin to answer the research questions listed above. I also distributed a survey asking a few questions about audience demographics and their experiences in schools in the hope of later contextualizing audience responses. I asked McMaster to utilize an adaptation of the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process in order to elicit audience reactions during facilitated post-show talkback conversations. Renowned choreographer Liz Lerman initially designed this process in order to place control of the post-show talkback experience in the artists' hands, so that the artists creating a piece could be more likely to receive the feedback most helpful to them in whatever stage of development they find themselves with a particular project (Brown 158). Without a talkback facilitation structure in place, I've sometimes found that audiences might spend a lot of time discussing part of a performance that an artist already knew she or he wanted to change, for instance; or, they might talk at length about what they liked or disliked but without saying why, which is often of little use to an artist trying to make nuanced edits to their work; alternately, the talkback experience

could simply become a mortifying opportunity to publicly criticize an artist. The Critical Response Process helps avoid these pitfalls. It asks audience members to first share affirmations, things they valued or particularly remembered about what they witnessed; then answer questions from the artist; and finally pose open, non-judgmental questions to the artist, which the artist is not obligated to answer (Brown 158). In some iterations, artists, dramaturges, and other talkback facilitators add additional steps as well (Brown 159). I was not particularly concerned about losing control of the dialogue or being publicly humiliated in the talkback sessions; I invited mostly friends and colleagues who I trusted to contribute generously to my process to the staged readings, and I asked for critical feedback quite candidly since I preferred to hear critical feedback among a small group of people who knew me rather than from public audiences later in my process. However, I had found the Critical Response Process to be accessible and efficient in eliciting nuanced feedback on playmaking projects in the past, so I decided to use it again.

Within the Critical Response Process format, I did ask a general version of my primary research question in the talkbacks – if and how *Conversation with an Apple* could be useful in movement building against the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration. However, this was not the first question I asked audiences to respond to; also, I did not directly ask the secondary research questions in which I implicitly articulate my understanding of movement-building and how the arts and performance might contribute. I made these choices hoping that my own goals for the play would not over-determine audience members' responses to it.

I recorded participants' voices and observed and took field notes during these dialogues. Audience members also had the option of submitting feedback to the same questions posed in the talkback in written form, or through a one-on-one interview with me. A few submitted written feedback; I conducted no interviews. My next task was to use modified grounded theory techniques to identify and analyze themes that emerged in participants' responses to the piece and dialogues that occurred while discussing the work.

Grounded theory methodology emerged from the social sciences, developed by sociologists who, when conducting qualitative ethnographic research, sought to understand their

subjects' social worlds on their own their subjects' own terms rather than by imposing previously developed theoretical frameworks upon them. Grounded theory methods usually entail taking field notes, sometimes recording conversations, sometimes transcribing those conversations, and then identifying themes, patterns, and outliers and assigning codes to them. Researchers may also group codes together by developing axial codes, concepts, or categories that link them. Early texts in grounded theory urged researchers to abandon all preconceptions before entering subjects' social worlds so that all coding would emerge only from the subjects' words and actions instead of from the researcher's social and cultural world. Later theorists asserted that all researchers bring preconceptions to their work, and urged researchers utilizing what they termed constructivist grounded theory methods to acknowledge the assumptions and theoretical frameworks guiding and shaping their investigations (Mills, Bonner, and Francis).

In this project, as you read earlier in this chapter, I chose to acknowledge the theoretical frameworks and political priorities guiding my investigation rather than claiming that I approach this research as a blank canvas so to speak. However, the initial impulses motivating the development of grounded theory appealed to me. They led me to this methodology because I wanted to adopt strategies of analysis that would encourage me to listen deeply to audience members' responses to *Conversation with an Apple* and keep an open mind, ready to recognize themes, patterns, and outliers in their responses that I may not have articulated in my research questions. This project is, in part, an experiment in using grounded theory methods to analyze talkback recordings and field notes. I never used such methods in my artistic process before this project, but approached it eager to find out if and how they might be useful to me and to other artists.

The insights gained through this modified grounded theory analysis, and also through a return to my guiding theoretical frameworks and further reflection on my practice, informed my revisions of *Conversation with an Apple* before a performance for an audience interested in social justice issues in education assembled at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Cultural Studies in Education Conference at the University of Texas at Austin on April 10, 2015. I made revisions in the hopes

of crafting a play that would better support movement-building efforts against mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline. I describe these revisions in brief in Chapter Three of this document, and in detail in Appendix A.

## **CHAPTER BREAKDOWN AND CONCLUSION**

Chapter Two consists of the script of *Conversation with an Apple*, along with a list of post-show questions posed to audience members. In Chapter Three, I describe, analyze, and reflect upon what took place in play readings and workshops. I share common themes, patterns and also interesting outliers that emerged through my modified grounded theory analysis of responses to *Conversation with an Apple*. I return to my guiding theoretical frameworks and reflection on my practice to answer research questions that modified grounded theory analysis of audience responses in the Critical Response Process did not fully address. I discuss how my reflections on and theorizing of audience feedback has influenced the development of the piece. I conclude by evaluating the usefulness of this play development methodology in crafting a performance experience that can support the growth of a strong movement against mass incarceration, with a particular focus on the school-to-prison pipeline.

I find that both Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process and the modified grounded theory analysis I utilized contributed meaningfully to my reflective practice. In Chapter Three, I describe how these methodologies yielded several key insights. First, the play does seem to have the potential to raise consciousness among audience members regarding multiple manifestations of mass incarceration as it affects young people, although I decided that a few key mechanisms of mass incarceration might be more fully elaborated through script revisions. Second, I find that when audiences responded to the play, the shared experience of viewing the performance functioned as a springboard for conversation about other shared experiences in their lives, thus building a sense of community in at least a small way. Drawing upon Teresa Brennan's work, I also theorize that the simple act of transmitting heightened affect together while viewing this play also built a sense of community. Finally, my analyses reveal that although some audience

members felt outraged at the realities of mass incarceration and inspired to make a change, many felt overwhelmed and hopeless after viewing the play. These analyses inform my most significant revisions to the *Conversation with an Apple* script and plans for post-show workshops. Appendix A contains a more detailed account of the revisions made to the piece prior to the performance on April 10; in Appendix B, I describe tentative plans for a series of post-show workshops that I hope can follow future performances of the play.

## Chapter Two: *Conversation with an Apple*

### NOTES

This script reflects a staged reading of *Conversation with an Apple* as it was performed in a classroom in the Winship Drama Building at the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin) on January 30, 2015. Dramaturge James McMaster read aloud the stage directions marked here in bold font. The performer read from a script, sometimes improvising. Due to its conversational nature, many scenes in the play are performed slightly differently each time, in response to each audience. Scenes Three, Five, Six, and Nine in particular can vary quite a bit since each audience reacts to the protagonist's directions and questions differently; the play's protagonist reacts differently in turn.

Chapter Three of this document describes how audiences responded to this iteration of the play, and how those responses informed script revisions before the next performance of the piece at the Fourth Annual Cultural Studies in Education Conference at UT-Austin on April 10, 2015. For a more detailed account of those revisions, see Appendix A.

Revisions to the piece will likely continue. For the most updated version of this script and/or to request permission to perform it, contact playwright Natalie Marlena Goodnow at [nataliemgoodnow@gmail.com](mailto:nataliemgoodnow@gmail.com).

### SCENE ONE

*The play takes place in a classroom. The audience is seated in desks in a semi-circle around the playing area. A rolling chalkboard rests upstage. The word "responsibility" is written in the middle of the board, with a web of ideas/associations branching off of it: "to do homework," "to clean your room," "to do what you said you would do," "means your fault," "for your actions." There is a white wooden stool sitting in the middle of the empty space, with one bright red apple sitting on it. Ms. Eden enters from behind the audience, turns the lights on, and begins erasing the words written on the blackboard. She is tired. Once she's done erasing, she turns around to face the audience. She doesn't acknowledge them yet. She notices the apple. She goes to pick it up, places it on the chalk tray on the edge of the chalkboard, and exits behind the chalkboard, talking to herself as she walks.*

I didn't think anybody did that anymore. That's sweet.

### SCENE TWO

***Lighting dims. We hear the ambient noises of a restaurant, or maybe a bar. Ms. Eden re-enters from behind the blackboard. She moves the stool downstage right and takes a seat. Ms. Eden is holding a wine glass.***

Yes, um, so that's exactly what that means. Uh, um I teach fifth grade, so my students call me Ms. Eden. Just, just like that, that's what I'm called every day.

Well, um, I teach Language Arts and Social Studies mostly, that's what I'm a, a specialist in, my certification.

And the school, right, the school I'm at it's a underachieving? I guess? No, I don't think that's the- I don't think that's a good way to put it. Um, low socio-economic sta- or under-resourced- I don't know! (*Laughs*) It's kind of hard to keep up with how you're supposed to say these things, you know? Um, well anyways, I guess what it, what it is, is there's a lot of students who are Hispanic, or Mexican really, and then the second biggest group after that is African American students. There's a few White kids in each grade. And well, from what I can tell and from, from all these conversations with, (*correcting herself, smiling*) some conversations with staff, most of our students' families don't have a lot of money, a lot of them came to this country uh, without documentation.

Oh, well I, I moved here to thi- Oh no, you mean where I'm from ethnically? Oh, ok, (*laughs*), well, Eden is obviously not a Hispanic last name but that's- Eden's from my dad's side of the family. My mom's side of the family's Hispanic, and, you know, one funny thing about where I work is, there's not actually a lot of teachers at the school who are not white. And I'm a brand new teacher - I'm a first year teacher - so you would think I'd be the one asking all these questions and I am but, but some of them ask me - not all of them - but some of them ask me these kind of funny questions, like maybe I'm gonna have some kind of insider knowledge about how to reach the kids. And I don't! (*She laughs.*)

I mean, I thought I was prepared, I really did, but the school where I did my student teaching, it was nothing like this. It just didn't feel the same at all. No school I ever went to felt like this. I don't mean that they're bad kids. I hope it didn't sound like that. I really don't mean that, I, I don't actually think that any kids are bad. I think that some kids need more attention, and they need more attention for reasons that are not their fault. It has nothing to do with anything remotely their fault. Um, there's so many of them, the classes sizes are even a lot bigger than where I did my student teaching, and they need a lot, and there's just one of me and, it fee- I don't know if I'm enough, you know.

Um, another example, of what I'm talking about – there's a middle school right across the street from the school where I teach, and you can actually, you can see it from the window of my portable. And every day at dismissal at the middle school there's cop cars, one on every corner of the campus. And I guess that's supposed to make us feel safe, but it doesn't seem that way to me. Or, then the other day, um, all the kids suddenly ran over to the window, and I was trying so hard to get them back on track with the lesson, but of course I couldn't do it, and they were all looking because this one little child, um, I mean sixth-grade I guess, was there outside the middle school, right there across the street, and there was this group of kids all around him, and they were all beating him up. And then the kids in my class told me that they were afraid to go to middle school, that they wished they didn't have to go. So I guess that's what I mean.

Well, I had this idea. I haven't asked the administration about it or anything, but I really hope they'll say yes. And I'm pretty sure I could convince them that it's a, it's a good teambuilding activity, or figure out some way to connect it to state standards, I don't know. But but, what I want to do is have all the kids in my class, my first class, my first year, paint a mural – on the



wall of the portable, um, right here inside so we can see it all day every day, um – of the world that we want to build together, the world that we’re going to build starting now, starting today. Really I just want them to have something else to look at. I hate the idea that they’re gonna have less and less to look forward to the older they get, you know?

*Ms. Eden moves the stool downstage left and then exits behind the chalkboard.*

### SCENE THREE

***We hear the sound of a school bell ringing as the lights brighten.*** *She re-enters. Ms. Eden addresses the audience as if they were her students.*

All right! Good morning, everyone. I’m so glad you’re all ready to start doing some excellent learning today. Um, I want us to try something a bit different for how we go through our vocabulary words, ok? I read about this, I think you’re really gonna like it, we’re gonna get to get out of our seats! Um, so, what I’m gonna do, is I’m gonna write one of our words from our list on the board, and what I want you to do is, um, just think of what you think of, or what you feel too, both of those, when you think of this word, and you’re gonna stand up next to your desk and make a frozen statue with your body of just whatever you think of, ok? It’s not a pop quiz, you can’t get it wrong. It’s just another way to, uh, learn about the words so we’ll remember them more. Ok? If you have any questions I can help while we start doing this.

*(She writes on the chalkboard as she speaks the next sentence.)* So, the word we’re gonna start with is innocence. Ok? I know we looked these up yesterday, um, but can somebody just remind us what innocence means?

I know we know! Don’t be shy, just raise your hand. Really!

You look like you know! Oh, you’re raising your hand, ok, yes.

To not be guilty. Ok, thank you, that’s a great start! So innocence is to not be guilty, an antonym of guilty. Ok. So, if it’s to not be guilty, what is it? To be what?

Free of fault, ooh, that’s a very sophisticated way of putting it! Good job!

Yes?

Uncorrupted, oh, I like that. Yeah?

Free of blame, yeah, thank you, thank you.

Ooh, there’s a lot of UNcorrupted, FREE of blame, NOT at fault, we have a lot of ideas about what it’s not. Yeah, sometimes when people talk about innocence, they think it means, um, like someone young, uh, someone who’s still learning, maybe they don’t know a whole lot yet. Sometimes people think it means pure. we know what pure means, yeah.

Ok, I think we have plenty for us to make these statues. So if you would please stand up next to your desk, really do it, give it a try. You can't get it wrong. It's just another way to remember all these words we're learning. And let's see your statues of innocence – I cannot wait – in five, four, three, two, one, and freeze!

Perfect. Your first time, and you did it perfect! So I see, oh, somebody has their hands like this, eyes wide, looking up. Oh, yours is kinda similar, over to the side, eyes wide, looking up. Oh, this one's looking down, though. Some hands folded, some hands open like, "I didn't do anything." These hands are open too. These are very expressive statues. I can really feel the innocence in the room today! Great work, everyone! Ok, you can unfreeze.

*Ms. Eden exits behind the chalkboard.*

#### SCENE FOUR

***The lighting is dim again. Ms. Eden re-enters and takes a seat on the stool, now downstage left. We hear the ambient noises of another restaurant, or maybe a bar. Ms. Eden has a different glass in her hand this time.***

Ugh! So, there's this one young man who was in my class my first – I'm so sorry! *(Laughing)* I can't believe I'm doing this again! Um, I keep trying to meet people on OkCupid, and - There's not a lot of men where I work, you know, especially not married men. And every time, I just end up talking about work! I don't know if people who are not teachers understand it, though, you know, cause there's just so much that happens, just me and these kids, I'm the only adult in the room, and all these – to the rest of the world it's small things, you know, it's small that so-and-so got excited about reading today for the first time the entire year, or that so-and-so and so-and-so finally started to get along after they've been arguing for approximately a month – but to us it's huge! You know, to us it's so important, in our, in our little community, you know, and you just want a witness. So anyways, I guess that's why I'm *(laughing)* constantly talking about work on these dates.

Um, anyways, so there's this young man, and he was in my class the, the first year I was teaching, um, back when I was all bright and hopeful, right. And, he was very funny, he was very sweet. And here's another thing that I don't know if people who are not teachers understand. They think that ten years old, fifth grade is still very young, but the young people, the fifth-graders, they don't see themselves that way. In fifth grade, they already have their eyes towards middle school, so they're already kinda trying to put on whatever demeanor they think they need to survive that, you know? So, even ten, sometimes even younger than that, nine, fourth-grade, they're already - the boys are already starting to build this shell, especially. Trying to walk around like little men.

Anyways, this one student, Angel, he just kept his softness and his sweetness a little longer, and I loved him for that. He was so funny, very curious about everything, often disruptive, but not in a way that was hurting anybody, it just was never what he was supposed to be doing. And I think sometimes he would, like, follow my directions but sort of exaggerate them just to see what I would do. He was just always curious about it. Like he'd just say, "YES MA'AM!" and yell it after everything I'd say, *(laughing)* which I thought was so funny and it was so hard to keep a

straight face. Ah, or another time, we were making this movie, it was towards the end of the year, I don't remember what it was about. It was, uh, some war of something. Anyways, the first time he saw himself on the screen he got so excited that he jumped in front of his desk and started screaming like this (*standing and acting it out, jumping up and down, fists clenched*) going (*high-pitched*) "Aaaaaaaaahhhh!" (*Laughing*) And of course I had to tell him to stop, because you can't do that in a school, you can't scream like that in a school, but, oh my gosh it was so funny. Oh anyways, uh, I know you're not supposed to have favorites but obviously, he's still one of my favorites.

And, well, the thing is I've actually been seeing him a lot lately. Uh, he goes to the middle school across the street from the school where I teach and uh, he started coming around, I think because his little sister's in my class so he was coming to pick her up. But, the elementary school gets out a couple hours earlier than the middle school so that obviously means he was cutting some kind of class. But I didn't really say a big, I didn't make a big thing of it because if there's a reason to skip I guess picking up your little sister is a pretty good reason and, uh, well, then his little sister actually joined the afterschool program, but he still kept coming every now and then. I don't, I don't know, I honestly don't know why. Um, I mean, he wanted to show me YouTube videos. I told him he could use the computer for his homework, but he says he never has any. I did ask him, you know, why he wasn't in class, and he just kinda dismissed me like that was really cute that I was so naïve that I would think that he should be in class, like it was just adorable that I would be worried about this. He's getting that toughness now.

And I'm actually pretty worried about him because he's been held back at least once. I don't even think he's supposed to be in middle school anymore. Maybe twice, but, it's just hard to believe it's been that long already, you know.

Anyways, I, I, I actually am really worried about him, because he's, he's, he might be sorta silly and a little off the wall sometimes but he's not stupid. He's not stupid at all, and - I'm not pushing it though, you know. Cause, I don't wanna, I don't know, I don't want him to totally shut down or close off on me, and - I don't really know what I can do in this situation anyways. I'm not even his teacher anymore. And even if I was, there's only so much you can do, you know? If there's anything I have learned in these first years of teaching, it's probably that. There's only so much you can do.

*She moves the stool downstage right, and then exits behind the chalkboard.*

## SCENE FIVE

***The lights brighten, and we hear a school bell, along with the noisy hubbub of children talking over each other. Ms. Eden re-enters. She writes the date, January 20, 2009, on the chalkboard, along with the word "INAUGURATION!" in big bold letters.***

Hello fifth grade! Welcome, everyone! I am so excited that we are all gathered here today. I'm so excited because today is the inauguration of Barack Obama. I'm so excited I wrote it too big, I almost didn't have room on the board. I'm so happy that we're gonna be all of us together to share this moment. Now who can tell me, why is it so special that Barack Obama is being inaugurated today?

Yes, ma'am.

That's right! He's Black! He's our first Black president in the entire history of the United States of America. And why is that? This country's been around a while now. Why is that?

Yes.

Yes, yes, exactly, they were all White. Yeah, yeah, why is that?

There have been people of all colors, races in the United States for a long time!

Oh, y'all are being shy, I know we talked about this in Social Studies! Remember, we talked about the Civil Rights Movement, they were fighting against what?

Exactly! Racism! Racism! Ok, this is just review guys, this isn't a test. I just want us to, I just want us to remember why this is such an important day, ok? Now um, so what changed? There was so much racism! What changed?

There could never be a Black president before, and now there is. Something changed!

Civil Rights, yeah! And who are some of the people who fought for our Civil Rights?

César Chávez was one, very good!

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., exactly, exactly. So, we understand, I know we do, why this is such a very special, very exciting day. I am so glad. Who knows, maybe we have the first Latino president here in this room today, I don't know. The first woman president, it could be! I don't know! *(Looking towards the back of the classroom)* Angel! Angel, I really want to hear what you're saying, but you need to raise your hand. You – *(he blurts out what he has to say anyways.)* You are right, Angel. *(Smiling)* If Barack Obama can do it, then so can we. But I really need us to quiet down now because it's about to start! I don't want us to miss a single second! All right!

*Ms. Eden exits behind the chalkboard. We hear the sound of the TV broadcast begin as the lights fade. Slowly they rise again on a new day.*

## SCENE SIX

*Ms. Eden enters again. She erases the chalkboard briskly and then turns to face the audience.*

Ok! So, just like we've been doing, we're going to create a frozen statue of another vocabulary word. This word is *(writing it on the board)* desire. Ok? Can somebody just quickly remind us what this means? School-appropriate answers, please.

Yes.

A want! Yes, yes! Is it just like a little want?

Usually a big want, a strong want.

A wish! Yes, yes. A want, a wish, usually a strong one.

Yeah, I think we've got the hang of it. So, you're going to stand next to your desk, and, just whatever you think of when you think of the word desire, you're gonna make a frozen statue with your body. But let's please just keep it school-appropriate, that's all I ask. Ok? So, let's see those frozen statues in five, four, three – no wrong answers, we're just putting it in our bodies to help us remember these words – two, one, and freeze!

Oh! I see so many hands reaching out, arms outstretched, your whole bodies stretched, out to the side, up to the sky! Ooh, I see somebody like they're holding their hearts, ooh, they're praying even, it looks like somebody's praying over here, oh, crossing their fingers like oh please please please, oh and hands clenched – ooh it seems like hands could be out or in to show desire. That's so cool! Oh, we're wishing for so many things in here today! Thank you everyone. You can relax. You've done a wonderful job.

*Ms. Eden exits behind the chalkboard. Lights dim.*

#### SCENE SEVEN

*We hear the sound of nighttime crickets. Ms. Eden has a drink in her hand again. She takes a seat on the stool now downstage right.*

I mean, I mean, you know, I've been wishing that I wrote them down, actually, because kids say so many funny things, and, and after a while they start to blend together. Um, some of my favorite things to hear, actually, are their questions. Cause I think as adults, really we are so used to the world being the way it is, it just doesn't occur to us to question some of these things. I just really like to hear what they have questions about.

Uh, like, our current event presentations especially, I really like to hear what they have to say about what's going on in our world right now. Like, um, oh my gosh, they were asking the other day, uh, "Miss, why is it so hard for grown-ups to share? I mean, teachers tell us every day since kindergarten that we need to share, but then there's all these rich people who don't share with poor people." (*Laughs*) Uh, I really didn't know how to explain that at all. Oh gosh, and then, and then sometimes it's actually it's really quite serious. Um, we started talking about immigration policy during some of the presentations. It's a really big issue for them, and they asked me, "Why should it matter so much whether somebody's born on one side of a line or another, that that should have so much to do in your life with what kind of jobs you have, and where you can go, and what you can do, and what you can not do. That's not what Dr. King wanted!" It's a big, big, big question. And then we got going about violence, you know, violence in the United States, and parts of Mexico, and different parts of the world, and they asked me, "How..." No, it was this one little girl in particular; she asked me, "How could a person bring themselves to kill another person?" I had no idea what to say, you know. That is so

beyond my expertise. That's not Social Studies, that's not Language Arts, that's that's uh, like a religious, moral, theological, philosophical question, but – God, I feel like people really underestimate kids. Cause that's actually exactly the kind of thing that so many of my students truly want to know.

I guess that explains why, why in their letters – we do this letter-writing thing – so many of their letters sound like little prayers. Uh, after our, our current event presentations – um, I started doing this my first year of teaching and I really liked it so I kept it going – I ask them to write a letter to somebody in the world who could help them with this issue that they're reporting on, whatever problem is going on in the news, somebody who could do something to, to influence it or to change it. And I do this whole lesson on the branches of government, and I try to encourage them to write to someone local, because I feel like there's more of a chance that they would actually take their letter seriously and write back a real response, and not just a form letter, you know. But, that usually doesn't work. *(Laughs)* They usually, they just want to write to the highest authority they can imagine. And that is President Barack Obama. So, they send the President all these letters just asking for huge things, you know, that that, the kind of things that only someone omnipotent could grant.

Uh, well, I, I actually have some of them here. I keep copies of my favorite ones. *(Walking to pick up a manila envelope full of papers)* I, I hope you don't mind if I, if I show you just a few. I'm so sorry, I'm probably boring you! Um, but, no you're gonna like this, it's, um, ok... *(Opening the envelope and taking out the papers inside)* See, oh, and they always start with these little pleasantries, it's funny. So, this is a perfect example, it says,

*She reads from the paper in front of her.*

“Dear President Obama,

How are you? I am fine. I hope your dog and your daughters and Michelle Obama are doing okay. I think that you are a very good president and that you are doing a very good job. But there are some problems that I want you to talk about.

Gangs are a very big problem in our community.”

*She flips to the next page.*

“The turtles are going extinct.”

*Next page.*

Um, “The lunch at our school is very bad and not healthy and we are learning about nutritious,” I think they meant nutrition, nutrition, “and I don't want to eat our lunch anymore.”

The lunch really isn't good. Poor things.

*Next page.*

“I want more recess! No more STAR test, please. We want to play. Kids should be able to play.”

*Next page.*

“Can you make it so that everyone in the world has enough to eat? And good food! We are all humans!”

*Next page.*

“And can the animals all have enough to eat? And habitats. Animals are people too!”

I think I get what she meant by that.

*Next page.*

“And my teacher says hobos is not a nice word to use,”

Why’d you even put that in the letter, then?

“So, anyways, can you help all the homeless people? Everyone deserves a good home.”

*Next page.*

Oh, no, this one’s sad. This one wasn’t a favorite. I just thought I might need it later.

*Next page.*

“Please let there be no more violence in the whole entire world.”

Easy, right? Obama can handle that!

*Next page.*

Oh, this one’s actually, this one’s from that student I was telling you about.

“No more drugs! Just say no! Please pass a law that says that no one can ever do drugs.”

That’s kind of ironic now, um...

“Maybe can you come to our school and give a speech about these very important problem,” problems, “Oh and put me on TV, too? Then we will both be famous.

Ok, good luck being the first Black president, and I hope that maybe you can tell your kids and your dog and Michelle Obama hi for me!

P. S. Here is a drawing of me waving hi to you, and here is a drawing of you.”

*She puts the letters away.*

Oh gosh. It’s changed some in his second term, even, even in the end of the first one, but towards the beginning, and even in the election, um, they uh. They just, they loved him, you know! There, there was this mural we painted on my classroom wall the first year I was teaching, and it was supposed to be of, like our, oh, I forgot what exactly I told them, like our ideal vision for the future, I phrased it something like that, and they drew all the most adorable things, you know, kids of all different shapes and sizes and colors holding hands, stretched across the globe, with little animal friends, and beautiful green trees. Anyways, what they insisted was gonna be in the top corner uh was uh, a little painting of President Obama with his arms stretched out like this (*she acts it out*), like on a crucifix, and I tried so hard to talk them out of it, because, for one thing, that’s rather partisan, I suppose, for a public school classroom, and, well then a lot of the families of my students are religious and I just wasn’t sure how they would react to that but, uh, they insisted. They said, “Oh Miss, it’s just Barack Obama giving the world a hug.” I didn’t really feel like arguing with that, so I just didn’t.

I must be boring you so much. I’m sorry. Uh, I’m never gonna get past a second date like this, huh? (*Laughing uncomfortably*)

*Ms. Eden puts up the folder full of letters and moves the stool downstage left. She exits behind the chalkboard.*

## SCENE EIGHT

**Lights shift.** *Ms. Eden enters hurriedly. She’s struggling to find the words to say and to get them out of her mouth.*

I’m really sorry, but I, I’m really sorry I didn’t call to let you know, but, I just got the message when I was on my way over here, and I have to go. Um, it’s a student, a former student of mine. I know this was supposed to be a date. I’m really sorry. I will call you back, but right now he’s in a lot of trouble, and I have to go.

*She rushes out and exits behind the chalkboard.*

## SCENE NINE

**Lights shift. The schoolbell rings. It seems extra loud and extra shrill today.** *Ms. Eden re-enters. She is deeply tired. She erases the board.*

Ok, so, uh, we’re working with our vocabulary words again. Um, the word we’re focusing on today is (*writing it on the board*) is guilty. Ok? Could somebody please raise their hand and remind me, uh, remind us, just refresh our memories – the word guilt, what does that mean?



A feeling of heavy responsibility. That's a very, uh, a poetic way to put it. Thank you.

I saw another hand raised over here. Yes?

Yes. Thank you. You feel bad because you did something bad.

Um, yes, guilt is the noun, but if you're feeling guilt, then then you might say you feel guilty (*adding a "y" to the word on the board*), right? Guilty is the adjective; guilt is the noun. Um, it's not just a feeling though, it's also like, even if you don't feel guilt, or you don't feel guilty, sometimes someone else like uh, a jury, or the principal, might decide that you're guilty, because they think you did it. They decide that you did it. Right?

I think that's enough. Ok, so let's make our statues. I know you know what to do. Uh, it's not a quiz, right? Let's see in five, four, three, two, one, and freeze.

I see a lot of heads down. Some of us are doing scales maybe like the justice system, maybe somebody's judging. Someone looks like they might, looks to me like they might be, gonna be arrested; they have their hands behind their back. A lot of people hiding their faces, sad faces. This person might be asking for forgiveness maybe. A lot of heavy hearts in here today. Yeah. Me too.

Ok, you can relax.

*Ms. Eden exits behind the chalkboard.*

## SCENE TEN

*Lights shift. Nighttime crickets chirp. She re-enters and takes a seat on the stool now downstage left. Ms. Eden sits with an untouched drink nearby.*

They painted over our mural. I came back from winter break today, just to get some things ready for tomorrow, and I didn't expect them to be doing any major renovations, because usually they save those kinds of things for the summer, but, there it was. I came back, and they had painted it all grey.

And, I sent an email to the assistant principal, and asked why no one had asked me, or warned me, or spoken to me in any way whatsoever. And he wrote back and said that this was the new district policy, that all the walls in all the schools have to be grey, because anything else is too difficult to maintain.

So, I wrote back and said that I would have maintained it myself. You know, I reminded him, that that first year when we made it, I bought all the paint myself, I bought all the paintbrushes, I bought all the supplies, I bought everything. And it's my classroom! That's my – Well, it didn't matter. He didn't write back after that anyways.

It's just a painting.

So, there's, there was this one of my students who I really liked a lot. I liked him a lot, and that day he was having such a good time, and he painted moustaches on everybody. I don't mean he painted moustaches on everybody in the painting, I mean he actually got the paintbrush and dipped it in black paint, and painted it on his friends' faces. *(Laughing)* They looked so silly. Um, they didn't mind, they were laughing, and it was funny. But, when I saw him start to do it, I told him not to, and he did it anyways. And it was, God, I don't know, it must have been the third time that day that he had done exactly the opposite of what I told him to. And it was the third time that week that he'd had that many of those kinds of incidents within the same day, and I'd just had this evaluation, and they had told me, "You know, you have to set boundaries with these kids. You have to set boundaries, and you have to have consequences and you have to enforce them consistently because these kids, if you don't do that, otherwise these kids are gonna walk all over you," and I don't know what that means, "These kids." I'm getting so sick of the way they talk about our kids. You know, no matter what term they come up with, it's all just coded language for, I don't know, pity, at best. They don't respect our kids. Not even the people that are supposed to take care of them, supposed to take care of all of us.

Anyways, I uh, I sent Angel to the principal's office. Uh, it was the first time that he'd gotten in that much trouble in my class. Usually I just let him get away with stuff. He wasn't hurting anybody. Um, and they had to talk to his mom, they had to call his mom in, and she was really upset about it. She was really upset with him, and I just felt horrible. I just felt awful about the whole thing.

He's in, uh, juvenile detention now. He uh, he had gotten sent to the alternative center because they found a joint in his backpack. And I don't know what he was thinking. Because they make them wear clear backpacks, like clear plastic, or clear mesh. No, they don't have lockers, no privacy, there's... So I really don't understand if he was, if he's just trying to, to sabotage himself at this point, or, anyways. But that wasn't actually the thing that got him sent to the lock-up, you know. The thing that was the straw – this I just can't believe. I really – he got into some kind of fight with another student. A big mean, nasty fight, and that is nothing like the boy I knew. I just don't understand it.

And I've been talking to his mom, and I'm so over-involved in this situation, but I had given him my cell phone number because I knew that his parents didn't speak a whole lot of English and I just thought maybe I could help with his homework or something, I could help with something. So anyways, they had my number and I was in his phone, and so, I've been talking to his mom. And she was trying to figure out if she could go visit him there because they ask for your driver's license, and she doesn't have one because she, she, she doesn't have the, you know she came here without documentation. So, she wanted me to just go scope it out and let her know. And I told her how surprised I was to hear this about him, that it just didn't seem like anything that he would ever do. And she said the strangest - she said she thought it was because he had these new friends, and she said it was specifically his Black friends. She thought it was because he was hanging out with Black friends that he was acting like this and I don't know why I didn't say anything. I know that's not right for her to say that. Uh, I didn't know if it was the right time I guess. I don't know what the right time really is. She's really upset about all this, you know, because she wanted to come here to get a better life for her family. And to see her son going through this, it's...

Anyways, and I did go visit him. And, uh, I told him how much this just didn't seem like him at all. And he said that it wasn't his fault. Or, I don't know if that's exactly the way he put it. It wasn't exactly self-defense, but he just said if he didn't do it, then everything was gonna get a lot worse. It just, he said it wasn't his fault, he had no choice. And I'm sure I said all the wrong things. I was frustrated with the situation, so I'm pretty sure it came out like I was frustrated with him, and I just said, "Well, Angel if you didn't do anything, then why are you in trouble? If you didn't do anything, then why are you locked up?" And, again, this is not the first time he's looked at me like I'm a dummy, you know? Like I'm just so foolish to think that things would be fair.

I don't know, I... It feels like he figured out a lot sooner than I did, a lot sooner than his mom did, that all of this – the, the courts, the school, everything – it was set up to fail him. It was set up that way a long time ago.

*Ms. Eden moves the stool back to center stage, where it was at the beginning of the play. She exits behind the chalkboard.*

#### SCENE ELEVEN

*Lights slowly shift. Ms. Eden begins this scene kneeling, facing the audience, elbows resting on the stool, hands clasped in prayer.*

Dear President Obama,

I know this is a, an unusual way to speak to you, um, but I just thought it might make me feel better. Uh, it's not unusual for my students. Their letters, if you read them – I know you don't read them, but I read them. I've read every single one of them. And their letters sound an awful lot like prayers to you, and they seem to like writing them, so I thought I'd give it a try. And I really wish I could speak to you. I wish I could speak to you directly because you're just a very important person to my students.

They seem to think that you can do anything. And I don't know who told them that. I hope, I hope it wasn't me.

You know, and I need to speak to you I'm starting to believe that you can't do anything. Nothing. You can't do anything. You can't do nothing.

But you are so important to us. Watching your inauguration, the first time around, we were so proud, you know. We were proud of you, we were proud of our country, we were proud of each other, we were proud of ourselves, and that was so big. That was important, to be proud.

And it felt like you were living proof that anyone can do anything, if they just believe in themselves, and work hard. And you and I both know that that's not true. You're not just anyone. Your life in Hawaii and my kids' lives, they're not the same. You and I both know that, that growing up with even one white, middle-class parent, you and I both knew so much more about what our schools expect a young person to know on Day One of Kindergarten. Even itty-

bitty, just walking in the door, we already walked the walk and talked the talk that our schools reward. And it seems like you and I are proof that this has nothing to do with race, but you and I both know that, that, that's a lie.

Or maybe it's not that. Maybe that's not what it meant. Maybe it was your history as a community organizer in Chicago. Maybe that's what it was. It was that you were living proof that if we all stand together, and work together, then we can make change, you know, yes we can make things better. You were proof that the Civil Rights Movement, you know, my favorite unit to teach, that it wasn't for nothing, even as we're all sitting in this still segregated, still under-resourced school, too many bellies still hungry and hearts hurting.

A lot of my kids, too many of my students, they have family members, for a lot of them it's their dads, who are sitting in jail cells. And it's starting to feel like we are too. I mean, they're installing metal detectors just inside the school doors at the middle school across the street. And some of my students told me that they would feel safer if we had them here too. And I guess I can't blame them after seeing a class full of first-graders gunned down on TV, but I just don't know if I can accept that that's the world we're building for them.

And with this ring of police cars around us every day, that means that so many of my students' families are afraid to show up at the school, with all the officers roaming the halls. Cause some of them have warrants, because you know if you don't have money to pay your fines and your tickets they turn into warrants awfully fast. Some of them don't have documentation; some of them have too much of a paper trail, some not enough, but it amounts to the same thing – that my students are afraid that if their parents or families get stopped at a red light they, they, they might not show up to get them, they might not be there when they get home.

And what I'm trying to say is, it seems like you were proof that things really can change but now it seems to me that the story of your presidency is that nothing ever does. It doesn't. It can't. And I'm not gonna be fooled anymore.

*Ms. Eden crosses upstage and picks up the apple that's been sitting on the chalkboard since the first scene.*

My students ask me these hard questions, you know. And I'm their teacher, and I owe it to them to find the answers, to find the right answers. So, I've been looking, I've really been trying. And the more I look, the more I hate what I see.

See, I joined this reading group. Um, it's me and some other teachers.

I got off of OkCupid. I don't really think that was giving me what I needed.

Uh, anyways, me and my reading group, um, we share lesson plans, kinds of ideas for teaching outside the textbook, so that it's not so hard. And we read a lot of articles and books and things, and for a lot of us, not all of us, a lot of us, we're, we're trying to understand our students' lives, our students' realities more, and, uh...

*She takes a bite of the apple.*

I'm learning a lot. I'm learning an awful lot. But actually, the more I learn, the more I think – what is the point of learning? I mean, what is the point of teaching? If everything is so much worse than I ever could have imagined and there's nothing you can do about it?

A little of what I've learned is that you have deported far more people under your watch than any of your predecessors. And this executive action? That was supposed to stop it? It's a joke. After all the families you've separated, it's a pittance at best, it's divisive at worst. "Felons, not families will be deported?" I mean, what does that mean? When crossing the border again because you're determined to be with your family means that you're labeled a felon. What does that mean, when so many of my students' families are felons? Like I said, it's not that hard, when things start to rack up. And these drug convictions turn into felonies so fast. And of course it happens faster when people don't have the resources and they're self-medicating and they've – And you know what that means, to be labeled a felon in the United States of America? You know it means you can't live in certain places, you can't get certain jobs. It sounds a lot like "the New Jim Crow," but you won't even let us talk about it. You confiscated those signs at the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington because it doesn't fit with the narrative, right? It doesn't fit with your story, that there would be more Black men incarcerated today than were ever enslaved, that one in three Black men in his lifetime will be under some sort of state supervision, you know, parole, probation, incarcerated.

When they first showed me all those things in the reading group, I told them they had to be wrong. I told them they –

And I don't know what to do with all of this, you know? There's so many young people now that have looked at me and asked me what is true, and I have told them that the truth is that they were born wise and good, and they will continue to be wise and good, just differently as they learn and grow, and teach me what is true.

But, I'm starting to think that it would be much more kind to just tell them that this world was made to destroy them. And if they work hard, and believe in themselves, then a few of them will get lucky. But most of them will not. And they deserve to know that that's not their fault. And they should also know that there's very few people who are going to believe that's true.

*As Ms. Eden exits behind the chalkboard she leaves the apple, with one bite in it, on the chalk tray.*

## SCENE TWELVE

**Lights shift.** *Ms. Eden enters from behind the chalkboard. She is grinning. She is ecstatic. She is just as excited, perhaps more so, than she was on the day of Barack Obama's inauguration. She is holding a large envelope.*

Guess who wrote us back! Look who wrote us back!

The White House! Who lives in the White House?

Obama! I told you he would write us back! I told you he might, especially, especially if we wrote really thoughtful letters with very close attention to grammar and punctuation. I told you he would write us back.

Ok, let's see what we have here. (*Opening the envelope*) Oh, this is cool, it's like a, a baseball card almost with Bo the dog. Should I pass this around? Would y'all like to see this?

Oh this is very neat, (*reading*) "Goal as First Dog: Make friends with foreign dognitaries." That's an important goal!

Oh, and here's the letter! We will get to that, we will get to that! Let's see what else is in this package. This is "Explore the White House through the Arts!" Oh man, there's gonna be a lot to look at. I'll let Bo go around first, though.

Oh, and here's the First Family. Michelle Obama signed it too. Remember some of you, uh, said to say hi to Michelle Obama. I bet he did! I bet that's why she signed it.

Oh, just a couple more things, then I'll read the letter. A map of the white house, "A Day in the Life of Bo." Very cool! This is really neat. Man, they sent us a lot of really neat things.

Ok, I bet you're excited to hear the letter. I know I am. Let's see what it says.

"Dear Students:

Thank you for writing me. I appreciate your taking the time to share your thoughts.

Your ideas are important to me, and your generation will play an important role in shaping our country's future. With a commitment to your studies and to serving your community,"

*Ms. Eden is trying not to cry.*

I'm sorry, students. I'm sorry, friends. I don't mean to upset you. I'm just, I'm very excited that Barack Obama wrote us back. Um.

*Still trying not to cry.*

"there is no limit to the impact you can have on the world around you.

In America, each of us can write our own destiny. We all have our own gifts to discover, and we can overcome challenges when we put in our best effort, ask for help, and try again when success does not come easily at first. So long as you are willing to dream big and work hard, you can accomplish great things and help others to do the same. I encourage you to aim for excellence in everything you do, and to always seek out new challenges.

Young people like you inspire me and give me tremendous hope for the future. Thank you, again, for being in touch. I wish you all the best.

Sincerely,  
Barack Obama”

*(Failing to hold back tears.)* Um, um... Teachers have feelings too, it's ok. It's just a very nice letter he wrote. You inspired the President!

There's uh, something I wanted to tell you all about. I was going to save it until another day, but I actually, I'd like to tell you about it today.

Have you heard of the Children's March before? Good, good. I saw one person nod. It looks like a lot of us haven't, so that's great that I get to tell you about it.

So, during the Civil Rights Movements – That's something I learned recently, that some historians call it Movements, not just one Movement, but Movements, because it wasn't just one thing, you know, it wasn't just one person, it wasn't just Dr. King saying “Hey everybody, let's do this,” and then everybody did it. It was a lot of people, a lot of people whose names aren't in our books, a lot of people whose names we'll never know doing all these things, and all of that together made things move. That's what made it change. So that's why some historians call it Movements, right.

And that was, the kind of thing that we've been talking about, Rosa Parks, and Dr. King standing up for human rights and for dignity and for respect. And people didn't like that they were doing that, the people that were in charge were putting them and lots of other people in jail, like we were saying. And in Birmingham, Alabama things were really bad. That was one of the places where things were really bad. And whenever people would go outside to protest and say this is what we deserve, the people in charge there, um, would put them in jail.

And, Dr. King and the other people he was working with, they had this idea. They said, “If we get everybody out into the streets, then they'll arrest everybody, they'll fill up the jails, but, you know what? At some point they're going to run out of room in the jails. They wouldn't be able to build enough fast enough to, to keep us all inside. And then, once all the jails are filled, what are they gonna do? They won't be able to stop us then. They won't be able to make us afraid anymore.” And so they were trying to get people to go out and protest, but everyone was still too afraid. They were afraid that they would get beat up or, or have dogs sent after them to come get them, and attack them.

So then, they, Dr. King and the other people, they had this idea to talk to the children. So they went around to all the schools, they talked to this DJ on a radio station that all the kids listened to, he helped get the message out too, and they said, “Will you do it? Will you go out into the streets and protest?” And guess what.

The children said yes. When everyone else was too afraid, the children said yes.

And they filled the streets. And they filled the jails.

And when the grown-ups saw that, and they saw that they were still being so mean to the children, the grown-ups said, “Oh no, that’s wrong, they shouldn’t be being so mean to those children, and those children are being so brave. They’re not letting those mean people scare them. They’re singing while they’re going to jail, they’re looking out for each other while they’re going to jail, and we’re gonna do it too.” So then all these adults started coming, days after days.

And, you know, some people say that that really made the difference. The Children’s March, when people saw that on the news, when people saw that on TV, that that was one of the things that really changed things, that made it so that the Civil Rights Act could get passed. But we don’t even hear about it a lot anymore.

And I have to tell you, I wasn’t surprised when I heard about the Children’s March. Cause I know you. And I know how brave you are. I know that you are the bravest people I know.

It’s scary sometimes, because you’re so unafraid, and I’m scared you’ll get hurt. I’m scared you don’t know what you’re up against.

I know there was someone else named Malcolm X, and he’s not, he’s not in our history book very much, um, and he didn’t like what Dr. King and the other people did with this Children’s March. He said, ““Real men don't put their children on the firing line.” That, I think, the idea, what he was trying to say was that grown-ups shouldn’t ask kids to do something that they’re too scared to do. Grown-ups need to be brave.

We need to be just as brave as you.

*End of play.*



## TALKBACK QUESTIONS

Dramaturge James McMaster posed the following questions to audience members after staged readings on Thursday, January 29, 2015 and Friday, January 30, 2015:

1. What words, images, sounds, or moments from the play are staying with you?
2. How are/were you feeling after seeing this play? – *McMaster asked audiences to respond nonverbally, by playing the “statue game” they learned during the performance.*
3. Was there anything that surprised in this play? If so, what? Why did it surprise you?
4. How did you feel about the way these characters were portrayed? – *McMaster asked follow-up questions about particular characters, moments, and responses as well.*
5. Do you have any questions for the playwright?
6. Do you have any suggestions for future directions for the play? What would you change?
7. Is there anything you think the playwright should definitely keep as she moves forward with revisions?
8. How do you think this play could be useful in building a strong movement against the school-to-prison pipeline, if at all?
9. What was responding to the play in this talkback session like?
10. Is there anything else you want to bring up in response to this work, or in relation to this research? Anything on your mind now that these questions haven’t yet addressed?

## **Chapter Three: Holding Hopelessness**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, I briefly summarize my original one-person play *Conversation with an Apple*, my research questions, key theoretical frameworks informing my articulation of those questions, and the methodologies I used to answer my research questions. Next, I share the results of my investigation in more detail, describe how insights gained in this process informed revisions of *Conversation with an Apple*, and conclude by evaluating the usefulness of Critical Response Process and modified grounded theory analysis methodologies in my play development and research process.

As I stated in Chapter One, I find that both Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process and the modified grounded theory analysis I utilized contributed meaningfully to my reflective practice. These methodologies yielded several key insights. First, I discovered that the play does seem to have the potential to raise consciousness among audience members regarding multiple manifestations of mass incarceration as it affects young people, although I decided that a few key mechanisms of mass incarceration might be more fully elaborated through script revisions. Second, I found that when audiences responded to the play, the shared experience of viewing the performance did seem to function as a springboard for conversation about other shared experiences in their lives, thus building a sense of community in at least a small way. Finally, my analyses revealed that although some audience members felt outraged at the realities of mass incarceration and inspired to make a change, many felt overwhelmed and hopeless after viewing the play. These analyses informed my most significant revisions to the *Conversation with an Apple* script and plans for post-show workshops, as I describe below. I also find, however, that while modified grounded theory analysis of audience responses in the Critical Response Process did help me to answer the "if" portion of my research questions – if the play contributed to movement-building efforts in a few key respects – these modes of research and

analysis were not always as helpful in explaining how these effects took place. I return to my guiding theoretical frameworks and reflection on my own practice to attempt to fill these gaps.

### **Play Synopsis**

As you read in Chapter Two, *Conversation with an Apple* tells the story of Ms. Eden, a fifth-grade teacher who struggles to keep hope alive. In this one-person play, the audience witnesses the protagonist as she teaches and shares stories from her first years of teaching. At times, Ms. Eden addresses the audience directly as if they were her students. In these moments, Ms. Eden asks the audience, in role as students, to answer questions about the meaning of three “vocabulary words” – innocence, desire, and guilt – and to explore these three concepts through an adaptation of Augusto Boal’s Image theatre, by creating “frozen statues” with their bodies representing feelings or ideas associated with each word. At other times, the audience sees Ms. Eden spilling out stories from her classroom on a series of ultimately unsuccessful blind dates. She shares stories of her relationships with her students in a historically underserved school, and of her students’ relationships to President Barack Obama. The audience sees a near-ecstatic Ms. Eden as she prepares her first class of students to watch the president’s inauguration in 2008, and hears about the prayer-like letters her students write to him. Ms. Eden and her students do become increasingly disillusioned with the president, however. Ms. Eden’s disillusionment eventually extends to the public school system too. As she watches a beloved and exceptionally creative student, Angel, get pushed out of his middle school and eventually be incarcerated, Ms. Eden is forced to come to terms with the stubborn persistence of racial inequities in the classroom and in the nation. She questions if and how change is possible. She eventually brings her distress to the president himself in a letter that is part protest, part prayer, and part epistle. She finds herself compelled to speak this letter aloud even though she knows it will never reach the president’s ears. The play circles backwards and forwards in time, enacting the contrast between Ms. Eden’s naïve hopefulness during her earliest days of teaching, the cynicism that

overtakes her in her moments of greatest grief, and the stubborn hope for a radically different future that she eventually chooses.

## **Research Questions**

I initiated this reflective practitioner research project to explore the following questions:

- How can viewing and responding to drafts of my solo play in development – *Conversation with an Apple* – contribute to efforts to build a movement against the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration?
  - How, if at all, does viewing and responding to the play raise consciousness among audience members?
  - How, if at all, does viewing and responding to the play build a sense of community among audience members?
  - How, if at all, does viewing and responding to the play inspire audience members to take action?
  - How else might viewing and responding to the play support efforts to build a movement against the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration?
- How else might viewing and responding to the play affect audience members?

## **Key Terms and Theoretical Frameworks**

Several key theoretical frameworks inform my articulation of these research questions. I draw upon Michelle Alexander's theorization of mass incarceration as a racist system of social control – a new formation of the United States' racial caste system built to function in an era where explicit racism is generally frowned upon. It is a system whose devastation can only be halted by a revolutionary social movement. I understand social movements as Daniel Hunter defines them as “forces of collective energy, channeling deep emotions like anger and love and mobilized by hopes and dreams for large-scale change” (5). I envision revolutionary movement-building as possible when it takes place in five phases, as theorized by George Lakey: 1) cultural

preparation, 2) organization, 3) confrontation, 4) mass political and economic noncooperation, and 5) the building of parallel institutions (“Strategizing for a Living Revolution”). I understand affect as theorized by Teresa Brennan as real, material, not abstract and ethereal (6). Drawing upon research in neuroscience, Brennan points out that when we transmit affect, we emit pheromones and breathe in one another’s pheromones, resulting in real physiological responses in our bodies (9). We feel collectively, not individually (6). We name the affect in a space as different feelings or emotions, however, depending upon the different understandings we bring to a shared experience (19). What’s more, as Diana Taylor argues explicitly in “The Politics of Passion” and as Hunter implies in his definition of movements, I agree that the transmission of affect is key in movement-building.

### **Play Development and Research Methodologies**

I worked to find answers to these questions by inviting audiences of educators and activists to view and respond to a staged reading of a draft of *Conversation with an Apple*. I publicized two stage readings by emailing information about my play development and research project to people I knew who I thought might have some knowledge or interest in social justice movement-building, mass incarceration, and/or education more generally, and by encouraging them to invite people who shared their interests as well. I initially tried to designate one evening as particularly for people who identify as educators, thinking that holding space for teachers in particular might be important in this work. I found instead that a mix of people from the various communities to which I belong attended each reading.

I hosted two staged readings and talkback sessions on the evenings of Thursday, January 29, 2015 and Friday, January 30, 2015 in which I performed and dramaturge James McMaster facilitated talkback sessions. We gave audiences the option of participating in a group discussion, submitting written feedback, and/or scheduling a one-on-one interview with me. I based the questions posed to audience members – both verbally and on a written questionnaire – on Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process. I also collected some basic demographic

information and information about audience members' experiences in schools through a written survey. I audio recorded audience members' responses and discussion in talkback sessions and took a few notes about body language and affect; I later listened to those recordings and reviewed my notes with my research questions in mind. I also completed a modified grounded theory analysis to identify common themes, patterns, and outliers in audience response. Informal conversation with a few audience members after the staged readings influenced my reflections as well. These analyses informed my revisions of the play, which I performed again on April 10, 2015 for an audience gathered at a conference concerning social justice issues in education.

## **Goals**

I hoped that audience members would leave the staged reading with increased awareness, understanding, or at least curiosity regarding at least one of these many concerns:

- Mass incarceration as a racist system of social control
- The harm inflicted by the intense stigmatization of being labeled “criminal”
- Anti-Black racism within Latina/o communities, particularly as an impediment to building alliances to act against mass incarceration
- How mass incarceration depends upon the exceptionalism of a few in order to justify its existence
- The school-to-prison pipeline as one of several manifestations of mass incarceration
- How teachers unwittingly participate in pushing students out of school and into the criminal justice system
- The difficulty of teaching in ways that resist the school-to-prison pipeline in our current school systems
- Social constructions of guilt, innocence, childhood, and adulthood
- How social change is made – through collectives rather than by a few powerful and heroic individuals

Another aim was that audiences would find the characters in the play sympathetic and come to care about them. Because the characters were facing the problems described above, I anticipated that audiences who cared about the characters could come to care about these problems too. Additionally, I imagined that the protagonist's consciousness-raising journey could also model a pathway for politicization, and inspire some audience members to undertake a similar journey in their own lives.

I also wished for audiences to build community when viewing and responding to the play by: seeing their own experiences reflected in the play, and realizing that others in the room did as well; using the shared experience of watching the play as a springboard for further conversation about shared experiences in their own lives; and/or simply experiencing and transmitting heightened affect together. Furthermore, I aspired for audiences to leave the play reading and discussion feeling inspired to take action to play a role in movement-building against mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline, although I was open to numerous possibilities regarding what that desired action might be.

## **RESULTS**

Almost everyone who attended the two staged readings I held at the end of January was someone I knew either through my work at arts education organization Creative Action, my studies as a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, or through my collaborations with activist organizations Grassroots Leadership, Texans United for Families, and the Austin Immigrant Rights Coalition in the local community. As I noted above, although I initially tried to designate one evening as particularly for people who identify as educators, I found instead that a mix of people from the various communities to which I belong attended each reading; they seemed to base their decision about which night to attend mostly on what their busy schedules could accommodate.

Seven audience members attended on Thursday, January 29, and fourteen audience members attended on Friday, January 30. All audience members who came also stayed for post-

show discussions, although a couple stayed silent during most or all of the discussion. Eight submitted written feedback as well. I conducted no interviews; however, informal conversation with a few audience members in the weeks and months after the staged reading did influence my ongoing analyses and reflections.

On the surveys distributed to audience members, eleven identified themselves as female or woman, eight identified themselves as male, one identified as gender fluid, and one declined to identify a gender. Ages ranged from 21 to 37 years old; most audience members were in their late twenties (eight ages 25 to 29), with the next largest groups in their early to mid-thirties (five ages 30 to 34, five ages 35 to 37). Three audience members in their early twenties (ages 21 to 24) attended. Eight audience members who identified themselves as White or Caucasian attended; nine audience members identified themselves as Latino, Latina, Hispanic, Mexican, Mexican-American, Latino-Americano, Chicana, and/or Native. Four audience members identified themselves as having mixed racial or ethnic background; two of those identified as White and Latino/Hispanic, and one as White and Moroccan American. Almost all audience members (18 of 21) reported that they'd attended mostly public schools growing up and/or taught mostly in public schools. Audience member seemed to bring a wide range of experiences in those schools with them; some reported that their schools were extremely racially and ethnically diverse, and some said the opposite. Some grew up attending schools where teachers and families had everything they needed to support student learning, and some did not. One audience member noted on their survey that while their schools as a whole were racially and ethnically diverse, individual classes were not.

### **Raising Consciousness**

As I stated above, I hoped that audience members would care about the characters in the play, and that their concern for the characters might also lead to concern about the problems that affect the characters. Many of the audience members who attended and responded to these two staged readings appeared to care deeply about the characters. I staged the play in a classroom



space where I was no more than ten feet away from audience members at any given time. I could see that when Ms. Eden was upset, many of them were too. When I/Ms. Eden cried, many in the audience cried as well. More than one audience member said that the moment when the students' mural was painted grey stood out to them; I take this to mean that more than one audience member cared even about the paint on the walls – or perhaps the erasure its re-painting represented – in *Conversation with an Apple*'s fictional world.

More than one audience member said that this play could be useful in building a movement against mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline simply by bringing these issues up for discussion among people who don't know much about them yet. One audience member cautioned that some people would reject the invitation to consider these systems. Many said that this could be a particularly powerful consciousness-raising tool for teachers and for pre-service teachers specifically, so that they could prepare themselves for elements of the teaching experience often not addressed in their teacher preparation programs. Other audiences were curious about how young people and their families would respond to the piece. One was curious about if or how the play might offer young people an experience of being seen in a way that many adults do not see them. Another suggested this play as an alternative to the *Scared Straight* style of reality TV in which show producers take "at risk youth" to prisons in an attempt to scare them out of pursuing a life of crime; he suggested that this play could shine a light on larger systemic issues that place young people at risk of being pushed out of their schools and into prisons. Another audience member said, adamantly, that there are some people who need to see this play, because they perpetuate these systems and they do not realize it. One audience member, who appeared to be the youngest one present during either night's reading and discussion, said that the play really made him think about the people he went to high school with, and made him wonder where they are now. The play, he said, made him wonder about how lucky he was to be here at UT-Austin. In summary, although many members of these audiences were admittedly already rather knowledgeable regarding mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline, and although, as mostly colleagues and friends of mine, they were also probably

eager to encourage me, they did seem to agree that this play could be a useful tool for consciousness-raising regarding mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline. Most comments seem focused on the play as a tool simply to acknowledge and bring up for conversation that these systems exist, and that they do harm. A few audience members spoke about some of the nuances of mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline – listed in bullet points above – that I hoped the play might bring up for discussion as well.

One audience member spoke in particular about Ms. Eden's admission that her exceptionalism, like Obama's, proved rather than disproved the contemporary workings of racism. She stated that she thought that point in the play was well done and important. Others identified moments where the rules of the school where Ms. Eden was working made it difficult for her to teach in the ways that she hoped to. The "three strikes" rule under which Angel was punished for acts of resistance and play that didn't hurt anyone was one example; the moment when Ms. Eden exclaimed that you can't scream about something that makes you happy in a school was another.

In the first talkback, the question of anti-Black racism in Latino communities did not come up at all. In the second, I asked dramaturge James McMaster, to ask about it specifically, especially if the topic didn't emerge organically. When one audience member mentioned the moment in the play when anti-Black racism in Latino communities becomes most apparent, James asked for more comments about the audience's experiences and thoughts about that moment. A couple of audience members said that moment revealed to them the complexity of race and racism. One said that while he'd witnessed anti-Black racism in White, working-class communities, he'd never thought about or realized that anti-Black racism in Latino communities existed. One audience member said that she understood that Ms. Eden was struggling to respond to an anti-Black racist remark because she was trying to figure out what to focus on, and that she couldn't focus on everything all at once. Another said that she wanted to hear Ms. Eden say a little bit more about that exchange, just a sentence or two more, so as to not "let herself off the hook." Towards the end of the second talkback, one audience member expressed that, despite

her belief that this play had an important focus, she still had a desire to see the effects of the prison industrial complex on Black people centered more fully, especially since the first Black president was such an important figure in the piece. After hearing these comments, I decided that the play was not yet functioning at least one of the ways I hoped it would. Although I was glad to hear that the moment in question was raising awareness of the complexities of race and racism in the US for some audience members, I did not want Ms. Eden to be able to so easily let herself off the hook for remaining silent in the face of anti-Black racism.

A couple of audience members who identify more as activists than as educators said, on separate nights and in separate conversations, that seeing Ms. Eden struggle alone, always talking to someone with whom she couldn't relate, was moving. One said it made them sad; another said it was frustrating. Another activist in the audience on Friday evening identified the Children's March as "the foil" to President Obama, the alternative to "magical thinking" that allowed us to absolve us of our own individual responsibility to do whatever is in our power to make a more just world, because with magical thinking we imagine that some powerful hero will fix things for us instead. These comments suggested to me that, especially to audience members who already have some familiarity with movement-building, Ms. Eden's failures to find community throughout the play do demonstrate the importance of acting in and with community.

Finally, multiple audience members said that the words "innocence" and "guilt" or "guilty" really stood out to them, and profoundly impacted their experience of watching the play. More than one commented that seeing the word "guilty" behind Ms. Eden while she addressed the President gave that moment multiple levels of meaning; one person wrote that "the word 'guilty,' as if we were the jury accusing our country," was staying with him after seeing the play. Some audience members commented that the story seemed to highlight Ms. Eden's own journey away from innocence. We didn't ask enough follow-up questions to know what exactly all the audience members' thoughts were about innocence or guilt after leaving, but I was pleased to hear that the play inspired, at the very least, some curiosity about how these concepts are constructed.

I was encouraged to see that the play seemed to have the potential to raise consciousness in almost all the ways that I hoped it might. The question of anti-Black racism in Latina/o communities stood out to me, however as one that I wanted to spend more time on in future revisions of the piece.

Although I recognized that audiences seemed to care about the characters and their problems, and although audiences seemed to agree that viewing and discussing this play had the potential to help raise consciousness in a number of ways, I don't believe I asked enough follow-up questions in the talkbacks to determine the mechanism through which this consciousness-raising was happening, or had the potential to happen. Was the audience members' concern for the characters and their willingness to consider oppressive systems, and question big ideas linked? I still think they might be, but I didn't ask them specifically about this. In future reflective practitioner research, I will do so.

I did, however, have the opportunity to discuss these questions informally with a few audience members in the weeks and months following the staged readings, and these conversations have led me to some speculations about the consciousness-raising mechanisms at work in *Conversation with an Apple*. One activist who saw one of the staged readings said that he thought the play was unique because it was a third-person account of the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration that told the stories of some of the people most harmfully affected by these systems, but did not come across as dogmatic or didactic. He thought sharing stories of these systems through a series of scenes representing blind dates was distinctive and innovative, and important because it allowed the stories of young people, their families, and their teachers affected by mass incarceration to unfold gradually rather than being overshadowed by any loud voice yelling, "This is so messed up and you need to hear it!" Another audience member, a scholar of performance studies, reminded me how little most people enjoy being talked down to or experiencing attempts to manipulate them when they learn about oppressive systems in our world, and reminded me that *Conversation with an Apple* doesn't speak to audiences in this way.

After these conversations, I had an opportunity to listen to an audio recording of one of the staged readings to which audiences responded. After experiencing the play in this way for the first time, I realized that in Ms. Eden I had constructed an extremely humble character who rarely, if at all, talks down to any of her dates, or any of her students. When she tells the people she meets on blind dates about her students, she isn't trying to educate them or manipulate them towards any particular course of action; she's merely seeking a connection. She's just lonely, and wants to be with someone with whom she can share her joys, sorrows, and frustrations. By casting the audience as Ms. Eden's dates, I implicitly ask them to care about her and to form a relationship with her. She doesn't behave as though what she has to say is more important than anyone else's words, frequently even apologizing for taking up time and space with her stories. Listening to the play for the first time, I found myself wanting to shake her by the shoulders and urge her to stop apologizing, to value the importance of her testimony. At least one audience member seemed to feel the same way, writing in response to a question about what revisions he might suggest, "Maybe toning down how apologetic Miss Eden is. You are not boring us! (unless its just part of the character)."

With Ms. Eden and her seemingly endless series of blind dates, I seem to have stumbled onto a device that does allow audiences to take in information about the existence and harm of the school-to-prison pipeline without feeling lectured or scolded. In the relatively few moments when Ms. Eden does express outrage, it is directed towards her school administrators and the President, the people who represent oppressive state systems, rather than at audience members who may not have been aware of or consciously reflected upon their complicity in these systems until watching this play. Although one audience member said that she felt surprised when the audience was cast as Obama, others, such as the one I quoted above, said that he saw himself as a jury member in that moment, casting judgment on Obama and the nation. He seemed to position himself as a potential ally to Ms. Eden and her students rather than as someone she was judging. Furthermore, these moments of outrage come towards the end of the play, after audiences have had time to get to know Ms. Eden and Angel, to care about them, and to feel grief with and for

them. This sequence seemed to help audiences understand Ms. Eden's anger as "*digna rabia*," or dignified rage, just outrage, as I've seen the Zapatistas so powerfully phrase it.

Finally, I think that the joy Ms. Eden derives in teaching, and in talking about her students' funny quirks, might remind audience members of kind, nurturing teachers they remember from their own childhood. One audience member commented on this, noting that she loved seeing the joy Ms. Eden clearly feels in the classroom. Listening to an audio recording of the play, I realized that Ms. Eden does sound truly thrilled by almost each and every thing her "students" have to say when discussing their "vocabulary words" or the importance of Obama's inauguration. Talking informally to another audience member several weeks after the staged reading, I asked, "Who really gets that excited about vocabulary words anyways?" and he responded, "Teachers do!" This left me wondering if Ms. Eden is able to tap into reservoirs of affectionate feelings that some audience members may have for some of the teachers they remember from their childhood. Another audience called Ms. Eden "adorable." This is not a word I usually hear applied to politicians or activists. Perhaps a spokesperson for the harms of mass incarceration who is easily able to be adored could indeed offer a unique contribution to consciousness-raising in support of the movement.

### **Building Community**

My next secondary research question asked if and how viewing and responding to *Conversation with an Apple* built a sense of community among audience members. I imagined that discussing experiences that audiences share with Ms. Eden might be an opportunity for audience members to recognize that they share those experiences with other educators in the room as well. This might be a chance for educators to realize that challenges they usually face alone are in fact shared challenges. I also wondered if merely the experience of transmitting and perceiving heightened affect together could also build a sense of community.

More than one educator told me that they did see their own experiences reflected in the play, and that there were multiple moments that "felt real." Several shared real-life stories that

the play called to mind. One said that she hears teachers talk about these issues and questions and concerns often; two said that they don't, and that this play brought thoughts, feelings, and experiences up that usually stay silent or even suppressed. When I listened to talkback recordings, I noticed that, particularly during the first talkback, the amount of laughter seemed to increase as the talkback went on. I tried to identify what the laughter was about; in many instances, the laughter seemed to occur at moments when audience members recognized some kind of shared but often unspoken experience. They laughed frequently about how much the play depicted Ms. Eden drinking after work, for instance, and laughed loudly and for a long time when audience members admitted that they too sometimes turned to alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism after teaching some of their most emotionally difficult classes. This observation made me hopeful that viewing and responding to this play together could be a particularly powerful community-building experience for educators.

One audience member said that she was glad there was a facilitated discussion after the play, because if there hadn't been, she would have left really hungry to talk to someone about it. I found this comments encouraging. Even in the absence of a facilitated talkback, I think the play might encourage meaningful conversations that could foster deeper relationships with one another. One audience member said they enjoyed hearing other people's perspectives in this setting.

A few audience members in particular seemed to delight in asking questions and making observations about the Biblical imagery in the play – Ms. Eden's name, Angel's name, Obama's Christ-like positioning, the apple, and the moment Ms. Eden finally took a bite. More than one audience member, as I noted above, also seemed to enjoy discussing the effect that seeing the words "innocence" and "guilt" or "guilty" had on their experience of the play. These moments where images or words thick with associations were layered onto the story seemed to present compelling challenges for audience members, puzzles that they wanted to talk about with other people so that they could figure out what they meant.

In summary, it seems to me that the play did, for some audience members, serve as a shared experience that functioned as a springboard for discussion about real experiences in their lives that they may not have been nearly as inclined to share with one another otherwise. This seemed to be particularly true for educators who identified with Ms. Eden's experiences as an educator in historically under-served communities. There also seemed to be some indication that the play inspired a curiosity and hunger for conversation even among people who don't identify as strongly as educators. In some instances, this may have been due to the layering of words and images thick with associations onto the story, presenting meaning-making challenges for the audience.

I still feel uncertain about the role that experiencing heightened affect together played in all of this. I didn't ask about this explicitly; I tried instead to just stay open and available to perceiving the affect in the room, knowing that I would name it differently than others in the same space. There certainly was some sort of heightened affect. As I mention before, several people cried, and when James asked them to represent how they felt after seeing the play, I saw people with their heads down, their bodies twisted, their faces grim. To me, the air felt heavy. The word "heavy" was spoken multiple times throughout the talkback, and appeared in written feedback as well. I don't know for sure what this meant about how audiences felt about their relationships to one another, though. In future reflective practitioner research, I might ask about this explicitly.

If I had to venture a guess, though, about how the experience of transmitting and receiving heightened affect may have affected audiences, particularly in regards to building a sense of community, I would draw upon my own experiences making theatre and teaching with fellow artists and educators. It seems that the more I laugh, scream, and cry with someone, the closer I feel to them. There seems, in particular, to be something of a "war buddy" effect at play between my colleagues and I. I often feel closest to the people with whom I've shared the most difficult, emotionally trying experiences. Like some "war buddies," what I'm calling veterans who became life-long friends after serving in combat together, we retell stories of many of these



shared experiences only when we're together, feeling certain that no one else could ever understand them in the ways that we do. Conversely, I also feel great intimacy with the people with whom I've shared great joys. Drawing also upon Brennan's analyses of the transmission of affect that I outlined in Chapter One, I could speculate that it is in these moments when the patterns of electric energy pulsing within my own body most powerfully influence the physiology of the people around me as well. It is moments such as these when we feel and experience the world most powerfully as collective rather than individual beings.

When watching *Conversation with an Apple*, we see Ms. Eden sharing some of her most joyful and her most sorrowful moments. She invites us to experience these moments fully and care about them deeply. It may be that audiences who experience these moments together, who receive and transmit the heightened affect that occurs in such moments, also experience something of what I am calling a "war buddy" effect, or affect. They've shared something with Ms. Eden, and with each other, that cannot be fully explained to anyone who wasn't there; it must be felt, and must be felt together. In feeling it together, we release pheromones and breathe in each other's pheromones, altering the electrical patterns of energy within one another's bodies, experiencing as collective rather than individual beings. This is a uniquely powerful form of community-building.

Or, at least, that is my best guess. I look forward to asking more audience members more questions about the role of heightened affect in their experience of viewing the play and in their relationships to other audience members in the future. It may be, however, that this mechanism is one that many of us experience but, like me, many of us also struggle to articulate or explain without knowledge of the kind of research in neuroscience that Brennan draws upon in *The Transmission of Affect*.

## **Inspiring to Action**

I also hoped this play could inspire audiences to take some kind of action against mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline, and wanted to know if and how this inspiration

took place. After experiencing the intense affect in the room after both play readings, I became concerned that it was in this respect that the play was failing most profoundly. To me, audience members seemed deeply sad after seeing the play. After listening to and coding audio recordings of the talkback, I discovered that the word “heavy” and the words “a heavy feeling” were spoken repeatedly, as I noted briefly above. One audience member said they felt “heavier and heavier” as the play went on. I heard big sighs around comments and questions like, “It’s been going on so long,” and “How do you dismantle it?” One audience member said she felt “futility and hopelessness” throughout the play, and felt “twisted” afterwards. Another named feelings of heartbreak and despair. During the first talkback session, as I noted above, there was gradually more and more laughter as the session continued, as we excavated more shared experiences. Listening to a recording of the second talkback, I noticed just a few instances of nervous laughter instead, when audiences offered gentle criticism of the piece. I realized that most of the laughter that did occur happened after I tried to make a joke or two to lighten the mood. I exclaimed, “I have to get more hope in this piece!” at the end of the second talkback. Listening to the recording, it’s clear to me now that the sense of sadness, hopelessness, futility, and despair was worrying me even then.

There was also some anger and frustration in the room during both talkbacks, perhaps some *digna rabia*. One audience member said that the moment when Ms. Eden reads a letter from President Obama to her students, immediately after the scene where she confronts Obama about the nation’s failings, is when Obama’s “Janus face” came out. In response, another said that she thought, “What an asshole!” at that moment. Multiple audience members who submitted written feedback wrote that they felt “angry” and “frustrated.” I’ve had to remind myself that this was the case, though, as I walked away from both talkbacks feeling increasingly concerned that the play was too fatalistic to be useful in movement-building efforts, encouraging despair rather than *digna rabia*.

Daniel Hunter defines movements as “forces of collective energy, channeling deep emotions like anger and love and mobilized by hopes and dreams for large-scale change”

(*Building a Movement* 5). After these two staged readings and talkbacks, it was apparent to me that there was a lot of love for the characters and the real people they brought to mind present in the performance space, and some anger, but, if I wanted this play to support movement-building, there were perhaps not enough hopes and dreams for large-scale change. I also recalled a quotation from Malcolm X that I'd read before: "Usually when people are sad, they don't do anything. They just cry over their condition. But when they get angry, they bring about a change" (107). I began to wonder if, for this play to support movement-building, it ought to hold more space for anger as well. I also remembered Daniel Hunter's argument that while individual stories of lives impacted by mass incarceration are heartbreaking, when they've been combined to reveal patterns and systems at play, they became "source[s] of outrage that helped channel others into a strong group to make change" (20). This left me wondering if perhaps a greater emphasis on stories beyond just Angel's individual story might be useful. One audience member even mentioned that he would have liked to see more stories, not just one student's, so that future audiences could more clearly see the functioning of oppressive policies at play, not just one student's tragedy.

More than one audience member expressed a desire for more stories about teacher and student organizing for change in the play, or perhaps after the play. More than one also expressed a desire for the play to be followed by a workshop or series of workshops in which audience members could learn how to fix these problems. I was pleased to hear that the play awakened a desire to hear and share stories and tactics for making change, but wasn't sure if I wanted to share more of those stories within the text of the play or not. I wanted audiences to leave at least somewhat frustrated with Ms. Eden's circumstances, and with our own real life circumstances, so that we would feel inspired to do something to change things. I didn't want the experience of watching Ms. Eden totally resolve her problems to serve as a kind of catharsis that would allow Ms. Eden to vicariously solve the audience members' problems for them, thus relieving them of the urgency to do so in the real world.

It was after this reflection, and also after hearing audience members comment on how participatory the play was; how surprised they were to be cast as students, dates, and perhaps even President Obama; how surprised they were to be asked questions and expected to respond aloud; and how abruptly the play seemed to end, that I realized that I had inadvertently created a solo performance with a number of Theatre of the Oppressed techniques and structures within it. I cast audience members as “spect-actors,” as Augusto Boal phrased it, throughout the play. Audience members were never totally free to just watch Ms. Eden. They were always cast as characters in her life, characters she was often responding to. Their responses – their words and actions – influenced my performance throughout the play, particularly in the scenes where they were cast as students. Ironically, in this world, as opposed to the realities of many of our current schools, it was as students that they had the most agency. In these sections I consciously had Ms. Eden use an adaptation of Boal’s Image Theatre as well. Additionally, Boal instructs that in Forum Theatre, the play’s protagonist should fail to get what they want. The play should end at its climax. There should be little to no falling action. The play should inspire audience members to play a role in this drama so that they can right its wrongs, and help the character act differently to overcome oppression and get what s/he wants instead (*Games* 242). I hadn’t done so consciously, but that was exactly the kind of play I had constructed.

After realizing this, I laughed a bit at my own self-consciousness at what I thought was a rambling “monologue.” I have come to believe that even monologic forms of performance are not inherently oppressive, since I now agree that, as Rancière argues in “The Emancipated Spectator,” audiences always have agency to choose how to interpret and understand what they witness. However, it was not until after the staged readings and talkbacks in January that I realized such analysis was not even entirely relevant to this piece. I hadn’t created a monologue after all.

This realization helped me to decide that, ideally, I do want this piece to be followed by an interactive workshop, as all performances designed for Forum Theatre are. I’ve decided that I want it to be primarily the workshop space, rather than the performance space, where audience

members transform their individual grief into collective outrage or *digna rabia*, where they articulate hopes and dreams for large-scale change, and where they learn about strategies for making change that are comprehensive enough to hold space for audacious hopes and dreams. I believe that this collective outrage, these hopes and dreams, these strategies will be more meaningful if they come from real people with whom audience members might organize – a collective – rather than from one fictional individual. I’m particularly eager to try some of the Theatre of the Oppressed methods that I’ve used in collaboration with activists organizing against immigrant detention in this context, as well as some of the dialogue facilitation and interactive performance techniques that I use in my work as a teaching artist. I’ve sketched out some preliminary ideas about how such post-play workshops might unfold in Appendix B of this document.

One goal I set for myself in this project was to attempt to reconceive the solo performance aspect of my artistic practice, and I am pleased that I am starting to do so. One of my mentors in graduate school told me over two years ago that she was excited to see how my community-based work and my solo performance work might come together and merge, and at the time, I had no idea what that might mean. Now, I’m beginning to see it.

The emphasis I’m now placing on the workshop component of this performance experience does not, however, mean that I understand the viewing of the play itself is unimportant. With a more complex and nuanced understanding of movement-building, I now see that my play need not serve every role in every stage of movement-building all at once. It can play one role, in one stage, and as long as I work conscientiously to play that role well, it does make a contribution to others playing other roles and also in preparation for other stages of social change as well. With this particular project, I am most hopeful that watching and responding to the play’s characters and stories can help to begin to raise consciousness and build community among audience members, especially teachers. I am hopeful that the post-show workshop(s) to come can deepen that consciousness-raising with more information about the systems the play invites audiences to care about, with more information about strategies for

change, and with more real-life stories of people who did make change – stories which might serve as inspiration for audacious hopes and dreams for large-scale change. I hope that the workshops can also deepen the relationships that start forming when audiences use the play as a shared experience that serves as a springboard for further conversation, and start to lay the groundwork for ongoing organization. The play is not in any way extra or irrelevant in the process, however. I hope it can help relationships form more quickly by making experiences that are often hidden, silenced, experienced alone, to become visible and available for discussion by a collective. What's more, I believe the experience of transmitting heightened affect together, in and of itself, builds a collective.

One audience member's response really stood out to me. He's been teaching for approximately ten years, and he spoke very little throughout the second talkback session. Towards the end of the session, he said that the post-show discussion was a very emotional experience for him. He said there were multiple instances when he wanted to say something but just "physically couldn't." As he said this, I could hear in his voice that he was trying not to cry. He emailed me with his responses to the play later, and said that it brought up feelings and questions about the value and utility of his work that he usually tried to suppress. The thought that his teaching might be meaningless in the face of all the obstacles in his students' lives was difficult for him to face. When I read this, I felt awful. I had worked with this teacher before, I admired his dedication to teaching and young people greatly, and the thought that I'd given him cause to so deeply question the worth of his work was deeply upsetting to me. And yet, he concluded his email by saying that he wanted all the teachers at his school to see the play, and that he'd be interested in having me perform it after school for the teachers in the school cafeteria if I was interested, and if he could get the administration to grant their permission. This last request surprised me. My play made him deeply sad, made him question the value and meaning of his work, and yet he wanted everyone he worked with to experience it. I'm still trying to understand why.

Another comment that surprised me was from a friend who works as a trainer and strategies with *Training for Change* and who knows Daniel Hunter personally. He said that “despair is ok,” and thanked me for taking the time to write the play. I was shocked. How, in movement-building, could despair be ok? What I’m beginning to articulate is that shared despair may be an “ok” first step towards building relationships, and building relationships that can hold collective outrage. What’s more, despair is a perfectly a reasonable response when we’re in the process of raising our consciousness, coming to a fuller understanding of the depth and breadth of oppressive systems in our world. Asking people to deny that feeling merely demands that they experience it alone. Together and through dialogue, however, we may have the opportunity to transform our despair into something else.

Finally, a few more responses that surprised me were written ones that I discovered a couple of weeks after the staged readings, while I was sorting through what I thought was a pile of demographic surveys. I discovered that some audience members wrote that they felt “inspired” and “empowered” after seeing the play. I had no idea. I realized that I may have named the intense affect in the room very differently than some of my audience members. I still wonder, though, why those were not the feelings spoken aloud. One wrote that he felt “empowered,” and then wrote that “The play seems like a useful tool to help stimulate discussions around intersectionality and Education in the U.S.” This particular audience member, like I do now, may understand the experience of viewing the play as one important component of a larger process.

## **PLAY REVISIONS**

After engaging in the analyses and reflection described above, I decided to revise Scene Ten and Scene Twelve in order to not permit Ms. Eden to let herself “off the hook” for staying silent in the face of anti-Black racism quite so easily, in the hope of creating a bit more space for collective outrage rather than individualized grief, and also in the hope of articulating a bit more

explicitly a theory of change more capable of holding audacious visions for meaningful change. I describe those revisions below, along with a few more revisions that I made for other reasons.

I edited Scene Ten in order to contextualize Ms. Eden's beloved former student Angel's arrest within broader patterns and policy decisions. Although I do believe that the most fruitful moments of collective outrage connected to this project will probably occur when audience members discuss their real life experiences rather than the fictional play itself, I still wanted to make the many real young people Angel's individual character is meant to represent at least slightly more visible. I attempted to do so by adding a moment when Ms. Eden describes running across the street to Angel's middle school and encountering a SRO - a school resource officer, a police officer employed by the school district - who asks her if she has any idea how many of her former students he's had in handcuffs, and asks her why she's so concerned with this one student all of a sudden. I also added a moment when Ms. Eden admits that it's actually surprising that Angel wasn't immediately incarcerated after someone found a joint in his backpack at his middle school, since she's now learned that many students get locked up for much less under "zero tolerance" policies. I decided to make this addition after an audience member urged me to consider adding a few more details about zero tolerance policies in schools; after completing some research on such policies, I realized that many real young people's stories are actually much more tragic than the one I've created for Angel.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Ms. Eden now says that she hates what is happening to Angel, but now sees that what he's going through is not the worst of it all, that it's a part of something much bigger than just him. I also added a moment in Scene Ten when Ms. Eden sarcastically remarks that she finds it "very hard to believe" that so few students "on the other side of town" make mistakes like Angel has, when she visits him in a juvenile detention facility and finds that young men and boys of color are overwhelmingly overrepresented there. With these revisions, I hoped to create at least a little more space for *digna rabia* and the transformation of grief to outrage in the play.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *Test, Punish, and Push Out* by the Advancement Project.



Additionally, I added a few sentences in Scene Ten in which Ms. Eden asserts that her fear of an awkward conversation with Angel's mother is no excuse for remaining silent in the face of anti-Black racism. She states that the consequences for her students if people who don't even know them look at them and see criminals are much more important than her own awkward feelings.

The other relatively big addition I made was to have Ms. Eden state a bit more explicitly the new theory of change she chooses to adopt in Scene Twelve, one that might serve as a better container for holding hope. In this new theory of change, Ms. Eden chooses to have faith in the power of the collective rather than in heroic individuals; what's more, she chooses to have faith in the bravery and goodness of young people. In this next version of the play, Ms. Eden articulates this theory of change by explaining to her students why she wanted to share the story of The Children's March with them after receiving a letter from the President, rather than leaving them to guess. I also added one last "vocabulary word" to the play in this scene. Ms. Eden erases the word "guilty" and writes the word "faith" as she explains that she chooses to have faith in the possibility of meaningful change in the world, in the power of people acting together, and in young people.

I also made some revisions for reasons that I haven't discussed in detail above, since they were not as relevant to my research questions. At the suggestion of multiple audience members, I added production elements in the transitions between scenes, to clarify when and where each scene is taking place, to differentiate between Ms. Eden's different dates, and then updated various scenes so that they are consistent with the timeline now more explicitly visible to the audience. Also at the suggestion of an audience member, I added moments in which Ms. Eden and her students code-switch between English and Spanish, to make visible the politics of language in the school where she teaches. Furthermore, I made a number of edits not in response to any particular comment from audience members, but instead because of my own political priorities. I edited Scene Ten slightly to clarify that Angel's "self-sabotage" is a resistance strategy he employs because the adults in his life have failed to teach him any others, updated

Scene Eleven so that it could reflect current events relevant to topics addressed in the play, and replaced the word “Hispanic” with the words “Latina” or “Latino” in most instances. I chose to replace the word “Hispanic” with the words “Latina” or “Latino” because I heard audience members in talkbacks using the term “Hispanic” quite a bit, presumably because I did so in the play. I intended Ms. Eden’s use of the term to indicate her political naivety at the beginning of her teaching career, but realized that I preferred not to normalize the term’s usage. As a Latina myself, I prefer the terms Latina or Latino rather than Hispanic due to their distinct historical genealogies, as “Hispanic” was coined by the US state and emphasizes Spanish language and ancestry, whereas Latina/o emerged differently.<sup>8</sup>

#### **EVALUATION OF PLAY DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES**

I enjoyed bringing people in my life that had not previously met together for conversation about the play and about what they appreciated or related to within it. I was pleased to see that people who had taught in different contexts but who had never met one another before recognized shared experiences in the play, often laughing or smiling when they realized this was the case. I also valued the diverse perspectives in the room during each talkback; colleagues consciously engaged in movement-building sometimes seemed to understand and analyze the play differently than those who identified more as educators – highlighting Ms. Eden’s solitude, for instance, and expressing their desire for her to find a community with whom she could organize. However, the silence of one educator who said he found himself too emotional to speak throughout the talkback did make me wonder if and how his experience might have been different in a room entirely full of fellow educators. Although I do believe generative conversations took place in a room filled both with audience members who identify primarily as educators and with audience members who identify primarily as activists, I still hope to have the

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<sup>8</sup> See Diana Taylor’s “Opening Remarks” in *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/o America* for more on these terms themselves as sites of contestation.

opportunity to discover what a conversation in response to this play among a room full of public school educators, especially teachers in historically underfunded schools, would be like.

I was a little surprised and even more embarrassed to realize that not a single one of the audience members who attended these staged readings identified as Black. This left me wondering if my own community networks have truly become as segregated as the city in which I live.<sup>9</sup> I do believe that it is important for me to act as an ally by educating my own White and Latina/o communities about how mass incarceration uniquely targets Black Americans in the United States and about how we are implicated in the process, and I hope these staged readings did so at least to some extent. What's more, my goals and analyses in this piece were deeply shaped by conversations with Black classmates and professors in a number of courses I took throughout my play development process. However, I still wonder how the perspectives of Black audience members might have contributed to the conversations and analyses around a play in which the first Black president is such a prominent figure, and in which mass incarceration – a system that systematically oppresses Black people in the US more than anyone else – is so central. Without tokenizing any Black audience members who might see this play in the future, I do hope to have the opportunity to listen carefully to their responses to the piece.

I've often used adaptations of the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process in my play development process, and I found it useful in this process, as I have in others. I did discover that in order to more fully support movement-building efforts, I would like to design a different kind of post-show audience experience, however. Liz Lerman designed the Critical Response Process to keep control of the talkback discussion in the hands of the artist; this talkback structure centers the needs of the artist in their own creative process. This was helpful as I prepared to complete revisions of the play. Next, however, I hope to provide a post-show experience in which audience members' needs, experiences, and ideas for creative action in their own lives could be more fully centered.

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<sup>9</sup> See "The Case of Austin's Declining African-American Population" in *The Austin Chronicle* for a brief account of Eric Tang's research on this topic.

While developing past projects, I took notes during talkbacks about my solo performances, and I enjoyed how audio recording responses this time around allowed me to be much more present and available to actively listen to audience members than I'd found myself in the past. I also enjoyed discovering new aspects of each talkback while listening to the recordings, taking notes, and coding. I was glad that I improvised a version of grounded theory analysis in which I completed spot transcriptions of moments of particular interest rather than attempting to transcribe the entirety of each talkback session. This adaptation was time-efficient, and because of that, it is more likely that I will be able to use it again as a practicing artist. I also found that creating a digital spreadsheet – where I recorded talkback questions in one column, key words in another, a time stamp in another, followed by columns with codes marking emerging patterns – was a method that allowed me to take notes quickly, without having to pause my audio recording very much. It also represented the talkbacks in a visual format where it later became easy to see, at a glance, what audience members said, what themes and patterns I identified, and what outliers existed. I look forward to employing this method in future play development projects, and will indeed consider sharing it with other artists.

I did discover, however, that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol I developed was somewhat intimidating to audience members. I tried to offer many ways for audience members to maintain their anonymity, but none took me up on those measures. Although I decided not to name any audience members who attended staged readings in January 2015 in this document, all consented to being quoted, and to having their real names appear in future presentations and/or publications. In the future, I will simplify my research and consent protocol by simply stating before a performance that the talkback will be recorded, that anyone who participates may be quoted without their names being attached to their words, and that they are free to submit written feedback or schedule an individual interview if they prefer. I'll also state that talkback participants may be photographed. In an effort to preserve audience members' privacy, I didn't seek IRB approval for photography, but my audience respondents themselves were at times urging me to take pictures so that I could better capture nonverbal responses to the

piece. Unless I am working with particularly vulnerable populations such as children, people in incarceration or detention, or on probation or parole, I don't think the more onerous measures I took to attempt to protect privacy will be necessary in the future. The IRB didn't impose or require that I take such caution; I presented these measures and the board's representative approved them, and I imagine that the board would probably approve a less stringent protocol if I were able to argue persuasively that it was unnecessary, and imposed unnecessary anxiety on audience participants in my research.

## CONCLUSION

A few days after performing a revised version of *Conversation with an Apple* at the Fourth Annual Cultural Studies in Education Conference, I opened up an e-mail from a long-time supporter of my solo performance work:

Hi Natalie,

Just wanted to tell you how touched I was by *Conversation with an Apple* (Did you see me crying during the performance –I'm thinking probably not: I remember when I used to perform, I didn't notice the facial expressions of audience members).

Coincidentally, myself and a group of 4 other Quakers (+ 1 Huston-Tillotson prof.) have an appointment to speak to Sen. Cornyn (of staff, most likely) about Smarter Sentencing (Senate Bill 502) this Wed. so your show was grist to get me thinking more about what to say.

Thanks!

Charles Rand

Even before I finished reading the message, I realized I was crying. It is rare that a performer or playwright hears stories like this, in which an audience member makes a causal link between the performance he witnessed, the emotional impact it had on him, and the shape that his future political action will take. Certainly, Charles Rand is already a remarkable human being, a committed activist who was already planning to take action before seeing *Conversation with an*

*Apple*. Additionally, I credit only him for his willingness to be touched and transformed by the play. I do feel grateful, however, to have had the opportunity to participate in creating a space in which he might think and feel differently about what critical moves to make in this complex and often cruel world. I feel equally grateful that he let me know, that in at least one small way, *Conversation with an Apple* most certainly has contributed to movement-building against mass incarceration.

## Appendix A: Script Revisions in Detail

### NOTES

This appendix lists excerpts of *Conversation with an Apple* in which I made script revisions in preparation for a performance at the Fourth Annual Cultural Studies in Education Conference at the University of Texas at Austin on April 10, 2015. As I stated in Chapter Three, these revisions mostly fall into the following categories:

- Edits to Scene Ten, to clarify that Angel's "self-sabotage" is a resistance strategy, to contextualize Angel's arrest within broader patterns and policy decisions, and to avoid letting Ms. Eden "off the hook" so easily for staying silent in the face of anti-Black racism
- Updates to Scene Eleven, to reflect current events relevant to topics addressed in the play
- Edits to Scene Twelve, so that Ms. Eden states a bit more explicitly the new theory of change she chooses to adopt, one which might serve as a better container for holding hope
- Additional production elements in the transitions between scenes, to clarify when and where each scene is taking place, and differentiate between Ms. Eden's various dates
- Updates to various scenes so that they are consistent with the timeline now more explicitly visible to the audience
- Replacing the word "Hispanic" with the word "Latina" or "Latino" in most instances
- The addition of moments in which Ms. Eden and her students code-switch between English and Spanish, to make visible the politics of language in the school where she teaches

However, as I noted in Chapter Two, because of the conversational nature of this play, and particularly in the interactive moments in Scenes Three, Five, Six, and Nine, every performance of this play is slightly different. Because of this, even this most updated version of the *Conversation with an Apple* script may not necessarily reflect the most recent version of the play. Also, as I stated in Chapter Two, revisions to this play will likely continue. For the most updated version of this script and/or to request permission to perform it, contact playwright Natalie Marlena Goodnow at [nataliemgoodnow@gmail.com](mailto:nataliemgoodnow@gmail.com).

### SCENE ONE

*The play takes place in a classroom. The audience is seated in desks in a semi-circle around the playing area. A rolling blackboard rests upstage. It has cut-out words/letters/numbers (a bulletin board set from Teacher Heaven or a store like it) that reads "Today's Date: April 9, 2015." The word "responsibility" is written in the middle of the board, with a web of ideas/associations branching off of it: "to do homework," "to clean your room," "to do what you said you would do," "means your fault," "for your actions." There is a stool sitting in the middle of the empty space, with one bright red apple on it. Ms. Eden enters, her hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun, looks at the board for a moment, taking it in, and then begins erasing the words written on the blackboard...*

## SCENE TWO

*Ms. Eden re-enters from behind the blackboard. She changes the date on the blackboard to “October 19, 2008.” Some light jazz music begins playing. She faces downstage as if facing a mirror, takes her hair down and carefully arranges it in a twist on one side of her face, falling down in front of her shoulder. She moves the stool downstage right. She picks up a wine glass and takes a seat. The light jazz music fades out as she begins to speak.*

...Well, anyways, most of my students are Hispanic, um, or, I think Latino’s better... well, and then the next biggest group is African American. And then a few white kids in each grade. It’s mostly Mexican, though, really. Many of my students’ families came here without documentation, and they don’t have a lot of money...

...Well, yes, there is “security” I guess. Four cop cars come every day when the middle school gets out. They park one on each corner of the campus. I think it’s supposed to make everyone feel safer, but I don’t think it does. Well, it, I feel like it sends a message. No, like, “We’re watching you,” and “We’re just waiting for you to mess up, and we know you will”...

## SCENE THREE

*Ms. Eden re-enters from behind the blackboard, placing her hair in a low bun as she walks. She changes the calendar to “October 20, 2008.” We hear the sound of a school bell ringing. She turns around and addresses the audience as if they were her students.*

...You can’t get it wrong, because this is just a chance for you to show what you think of when you think of that word. It’s kind of like what we do with our word webbing. It’s another way to help us remember all these words we’re learning. All right? Ok, so our first word is... (she writes it on the blackboard too) innocence. Ok? What does innocence mean? What does it make you think of? Yes, I think it’s the same as inocencia. Very good. Muy bien! But let’s try to speak in English as much as we can, ok, since, you know, the principal keeps reminding me that next year in middle school you’ll have to do all your classes in English. And I want all of you to be ready to do great in middle school! Ok? So, innocence...

## SCENE FOUR

*Ms. Eden reappears, changes the calendar to “October 20, 2012.” She faces downstage as if facing a mirror. She takes her hair down, tries arranging it carefully over her shoulder as before, but gets flustered this time, and eventually settles for leaving it wherever it lands. Country music begins playing. She walks downstage left to the stool, picks up a mason jar, and takes a seat. The country music fades out.*

No, I, I still don’t feel like dancing! No, I don’t know, I guess I’m just tired, and I keep thinking about this student, well, a former student of mine...

## SCENE FOUR

*Ms. Eden reappears, changes the calendar to “October 20, 2012.” She faces downstage as if facing a mirror. She takes her hair down, tries arranging it carefully over her shoulder as*



*before, but gets flustered this time, and eventually settles for leaving it wherever it lands. Country music begins playing. She walks downstage left to the stool, picks up a mason jar, and takes a seat. The country music fades out.*

No, I, I still don't feel like dancing! No, I don't know, I guess I'm just tired, and I keep thinking about this student, well, a former student of mine.

So, this young man - Oh good grief! I am so sorry! This always happens! I swear, I am trying to meet people on all these online dating sites - yeah, this is actually the third site I've tried so far. I tried the free one, and then I thought, well, maybe you get what you pay for, and then I thought maybe those commercials about the algorithms, maybe there's actually something to that - but anyways, I've been going on these dates and I always end up talking about work!

...I mean, you're not supposed to let them think that you can just jump up and down screaming in the middle of a school! There's barely any wall between my class and the one next door in that portable, and my team teacher, to this day she still - she gets so upset with me because my classes are always too loud. So of course I had to tell him to stop but I couldn't help but laugh because it was really very funny...

#### SCENE FIVE

*Ms. Eden re-enters, tying her hair back in a low bun. She changes the calendar to "January 20, 2009," and writes "A historic day! ¡Un día histórico!" and the school bell rings. She then faces her class, with a big grin on her face.*

¡Hola! ¡Buenos días! Hello fifth grade...

#### SCENE SIX

*Ms. Eden re-enters from behind the blackboard, and changes the calendar to "February 20, 2009." We hear the school bell ring again. Ms. Eden erases the board and gets ready to write today's vocabulary word.*

Ok friends, you are really getting very good at this! So today, the first word we're going to make a statue of is "desire." Ok? You remember what it means? It's like when you want something a lot, so much it makes your heart hurt. I think in Spanish it's *desear* o *deseo*. And you remember what to do to make our statue? Showing the idea with our bodies. But let's please keep all our statues appropriate for school, ok? Don't do anything you wouldn't want me telling your mother about, please. So, everyone stand up next to your desk, and let's make our always appropriate for school statues in five, four, three, two, one, freeze...

#### SCENE SEVEN

*Ms. Eden re-enters from behind the blackboard. She changes the calendar to "February 20, 2013." She faces downstage, takes her hair down, and fusses with it a bit, even a bit more than last time, before giving up again. She crosses downstage right, picks up a pint*

*glass and stands next to the stool. Loud rock music suddenly begins blaring loudly. She winces.*

(yelling) What? I can't hear you. No, I can't hear anything you're saying. I can't hear – No, I was trying to say – WHAT? Ok, I'm going outside!

*She picks up her bag and crosses to the other side of the stool.*

Do you really like that music? Oh. Well, um, nothing. Anyways, what I was saying was, it sounds cliché, but kids really do say the darndest things! My students, um, oh gosh, you won't even believe the kinds of things they ask me. Especially when we do our oral presentations on current events. That's when it gets really interesting. Adults, I think we get used to the way the world is, and it doesn't even occur to us to question a lot of these things, but for the kids it's different. Like, when one of them did a presentation on Occupy Wall Street, they asked me,

“Miss, why do some people have such a hard time sharing? Like, why do rich people keep all their money and they only want to share a little with poor people? Teachers tell us to share every day since kindergarten, so why don't adults share? Why do they gotta go out in the park and the street just to get people to share?”

...Their letters sound a lot like prayers. Well, after some pleasantries, some hello, how are you's, they start to sound like prayers. It's funny, it's like they have a very close relationship with, well, I guess I would say things like that back when I used to pray, but anyways... I keep copies of my favorite ones. Do you want to hear? I hope you do, because I'm getting them out anyways.

*She's flipping through a manila folder with papers inside.*

I don't always carry these around with me, just today I was cleaning out my desk and I came straight from work, so – oh, this is a perfect example:

*She reads from the paper in front of her...*

“And my teacher says hobos is not a nice word to use-”

Where do they even learn that word? It's hard enough to keep up with today's derogatory language, much less slang from I don't even know when. Oh, this letter is nice though:

“So, anyways, can you help all the homeless people? Everyone should have a good home”...

...I'm sorry. I'm boring you. I'll never get past a second date like this, huh?

*She puts the glass and papers down, moves the stool downstage left, and stops for a moment to change the date to “**March 20, 2013**” before she exits behind the chalkboard.*

## SCENE EIGHT

*Ms. Eden re-enters hurriedly.*

Oh my God, I have to go...

## SCENE NINE

*Ms. Eden re-enters, piling her hair in a messy bun on top of her head. She changes the date to "March 21, 2013." The schoolbell rings. It seems extra loud and extra shrill today. She faces upstage until it stops. She is deeply tired.*

Ok everyone. You know what to do. So, now, our next vocabulary word is guilt. Ok? (*She writes it on the board.*) Guilt. It's, uh, yes, like the opposite of innocent. So if you have guilt, then sometimes, you feel guilty. (*She adds a 'y'*) Guilty. It's not like in Spanish where if you're hungry you say I have hunger, right? If you have guilt, and you feel guilt because of something you shouldn't have done, or something you should have done that you failed to do, the adjective is guilty. Or sometimes, someone just decides you're guilty, like the judge, or a jury, or the principal, because they think you did something wrong. Even if you don't feel it was wrong. According to the people who are in charge, you're still guilty...

## SCENE TEN

*Ms. Eden re-enters, changes the date to April 9, 2013. She takes her hair down, but doesn't bother to arrange it carefully. Soft jazz music is playing. She walks to the stool downstage left and takes a seat. She picks up a wine glass. She stares forward blankly.*

They painted over our mural. They painted it all grey. It was a holiday weekend and I didn't even expect them to be doing all that much renovation or maintenance or anything, that's usually in the summer, and, for God's sake why don't they just give the maintenance people a break, but, they did...

He's in juvenile detention now. Angel. He uh, he'd already gotten in some trouble because they found a joint in his backpack. They make them wear clear backpacks. Plastic or mesh or something like that. They don't have lockers. I mean, there are lockers in the hallway but they're not allowed to use them. No privacy anymore. I don't know what he was thinking. It's like he's trying to sabotage himself now, you know? Like, if they're gonna tell him he's a failure, then he's going to choose to fail on his own terms. It's a self-defeating strategy, of course, but I and every other teacher he's had seem to have failed to teach him any other way to take control over his situation. That thing with the joint, though, that wasn't what got him locked up, which is actually quite surprising. They've locked up a lot of kids for a lot less than that. It's not even three strikes anymore, it's "zero tolerance." That's what the SRO, the police officer at the middle school told me when I ran over across the street when I heard and begged them not to press charges. When I told him how I know Angel, he asked me, "Do you have any idea how many of your former students I've put in handcuffs? Why are you so concerned about this one kid all of a sudden?" And I had no idea what to say.

But anyways, they sent him to the alternative school that time, but then while he was there, he got in a fight. And it wasn't – it was a really bad fight. The other kid, the other boy was really hurt. Apparently he broke a bone. And that, I just can't believe. It just doesn't seem like Angel to do that. It doesn't seem anything like the boy I've known.

Me and his mom, we've been talking. I um, I'm so overly involved in this situation, I know. I gave Angel my phone number, because I knew his parents didn't speak a lot of English, and I thought maybe I could help him with his homework, I thought maybe I could help with something. So, anyways, I guess she found my number in his phone or his backpack or something, and she called me, and we've been talking, and we're trying to figure out if it's safe for her to go visit him. When you check in at that place, they ask you for your drivers' license, and she doesn't have one, because she's here without documentation, so we just don't know. And I was talking to her about all of this and how I just was so shocked that Angel would do something like that, and her explanation was that Angel was just hanging around the "wrong crowd" and she said it was because his new friends were black or something. And I know that can't be right, it's not right to say that, for her to be even thinking that. I don't know why I didn't tell her that. I should have said something. I guess I just felt bad for her. I didn't know if this was really the right time to try to talk about... She's so upset. She came here thinking that her kids could get a better life in this country, get away from the violence where she's from, and now her husband is detained, in a prison for immigrants basically, about to be deported, and she can't visit him either, and now this? It's like the violence followed her here, and it won't let her family get away.

I don't think that's an excuse, though. I should have said something. I'm going to say something. What am I so afraid of, anyways? Hurt feelings? An awkward conversation? That's nothing compared to what my students go through when people who don't even know them take one look at them and see a criminal.

This is so much bigger than just Angel, what's happening to Angel is not even the worst of it, and I don't know why it took the SRO – the police officer, they call them "school resource officers" – I don't know why it took an SRO to point that out to me.

Anyways, I went over there to visit Angel, and see what the situation was. And it was almost all black and brown boys in there, by the way. Which is odd, since it's really hard for me to believe that there are quite so few kids from the other side of town hiding joints in their lockers and in whatever kind of bags they feel like carrying. When I saw Angel and asked him what happened, how this could happen, he said it wasn't his fault. He said if he didn't do it, not that it was self-defense exactly, but something about how if he didn't do it then things would have gotten even worse for him. And I know I probably handled it all wrong because I was so frustrated with the whole situation but it came out like I was frustrated with him, and I asked him why it would be, how could it be that he's in this much trouble if he really and truly did nothing wrong. If you did nothing wrong, Angel, then why are you here, why am I here? And he looked at me, that same look like I'm so naïve, like I'm such a fool to think that things would be fair. I think he realized much sooner than either me or his mom did that this whole thing, the courts, the schools, all of it, it was all set up to fail him. It was set up that way a long time ago.

*Ms. Eden puts the glass down, moves the stool center stage, and exits behind the chalkboard.*

#### SCENE ELEVEN

*Ms. Eden enters from behind the chalkboard, tying her hair up in a messy bun. She changes the calendar to “April 9, 2015,” and picks up a few pieces of paper folded in thirds like a letter. She kneels, facing downstage, with her elbows resting on the stool center stage.*

Dear President Obama,

I know it might seem strange that I'm talking to you this way, but I wrote you a letter, and I thought about sending it, but I know you won't read it. I've sent you so many letters from my students over the years, and I'm sure you haven't read any of them. But if you had, this probably wouldn't seem so unusual. Because I've read those letters, I've read every single one. And my students ask you for things that I'm sure no one person, not even a president could ever give. They talk to you, basically exactly how I'm addressing you right now. They seem to think that you can do anything. I don't know who told them that. Maybe it was me.

I know this is strange, but I thought writing this would make me feel better, and then I thought sending it would make me feel better, and now really I just want to speak to you, and I want to speak to you directly, because you and I both know that you can't do just anything. Actually, sir, you can't do anything. Nothing....

There's a ring of police cars around us every day, and the moms and dads are afraid to show up at the school now, what with all the officers roaming the halls, you know, because some of them have warrants because they couldn't afford to pay traffic tickets and child support and probation fees and parole fees, and some of them are undocumented; some of them have too much of a paper trail, and some don't have enough, and, and a lot of the kids are afraid their moms might not be home when they get there, not if they get stopped at a red light and somebody asks for papers.

And of course that's not the worst of it. They've seen so many news stories at this point, of black men gunned down by police officers. Not just men. A lot of the stories we've seen on the news, they were teenagers. It's so much. It's too much. I see them wince when an SRO walks by...

I joined this reading group. It's me and some other teachers at different schools around the city, and, well –

I got off of Ok Cupid. And Match.com, E-harmony, all of it. I don't think, I don't think it was giving me what I needed...

You've deported far more people in a far shorter time than any of your predecessors, you know. And that executive action? Order? It's a joke. After all the families separated over these past six years, it's crumbs from the table. And they're not even going to let you put it into effect here

anyways. And the whole – the whole speech, the “felons not families” thing, it’s ridiculous when a person can become a felon just for re-entering the country to try to reunite with their family, and when prosecutors can load somebody up with felony charges just because they feel like it, and they do, and when people are poor and desperate and tired and it takes a fortune to get a good lawyer they plead guilty. I would too. Wouldn’t you?

And then once you’re a felon, do you know what that means? It sounds very familiar – you can’t live in certain places, you can’t get certain jobs. It sounds a lot like “The New Jim Crow,” but you won’t even let us talk about it. Your people confiscated signs that said “Stop the New Jim Crow” at the fiftieth commemoration of the March on Washington, because it doesn’t fit with the narrative, right? It doesn’t fit with the narrative, that under your watch, there are more black men incarcerated in our country than were ever enslaved. That one in three black men are likely to be under some kind of state supervision, probation, parole, at some point in their lives, even if they make it out of school alive, that’s what they have to look forward to.

And then, what with these immigrant detention facilities, these places so many of my students’ families are disappearing to, we’re creating a shadow criminal justice system that might be even worse than the mess we’ve already got.

At first when they told me all this in my reading group, all these numbers, that it’s so much more than even all the deaths we see on the news, I said it couldn’t be true. But it is. I looked it up, I looked at the numbers and, it is. And I haven’t been back to the group for a while. What am I supposed to do with that?...

## SCENE TWELVE

*She re-enters. She changes the date to “April 10, 2015” and turns around. She is grinning. She is ecstatic. She is just as excited, perhaps more so, than she was on the day Barack Obama was inaugurated. She is holding a large envelope.*

Guess what...

And the kids said that they weren’t scared. They said that they would do it. So they chose a date, and they chose a time, and they put it out on the radio, and then on that day and on that time all the kids walked out of school. I mean, maybe not all the kids of Birmingham, but it was a lot. It was quite a lot. It was high schoolers and middle schoolers and even little kids like, well, you all aren’t little kids, you’re already in fifth grade, I know, but I mean it wasn’t just teenagers, it was kids your age and even kids smaller and younger than you! They walked out of school and onto the streets, and the police rounded them up and put them in their cars and drove them to the jails, but they weren’t scared. They held each other’s hands, and they sang, and they refused to be scared...

And the reason I wanted to tell you this story today, is that, even though it is very exciting to get a letter from the President, I wanted you to know that it’s not just the President. It’s not just the President who can make change. When change happens, and I believe it does, I choose to believe it does and I choose to believe it can, even when it seems impossible. It’s an act of faith.

Oh, that's one of our vocabulary words. Faith. (*writing it on the board*) Believing in something even when you can't prove that it's real.

I wanted to share this story with you today, because when I hear this story, it helps me to have faith that change does happen. And it reminds me that when change happens, it's not because just one person, not President Obama, not Dr. Martin Luther King, not me; it's not just one person who makes change happen. It's a lot of people working together, believing in themselves, believing in each other, having faith in one another, that's what makes change happen.

And you know what else? A lot of the time, when change happens, when it looks like change is happening, it's young people leading the way. When I hear this story, it reminds me to have faith in the courage of young people, to have faith in you.

It didn't surprise me when I heard that story, you know? When I heard that the young people in Birmingham, Alabama were the bravest ones. You know why? Because I know that kids are brave, because I know you. And you all are some of the bravest people I know. It's true! It really is. That's what's so scary about being your teacher sometimes. It's like, y'all forget to be afraid, and I'm afraid you don't know what you're up against, and I'm afraid you'll get hurt. Malcolm X, he was another civil rights leader. There's not much about him in our textbook. There are a lot of people who they don't say much about in our textbook. Because they make it seem like it was just one person at a time, just Martin Luther King, or just Rosa Parks or just Harriet Tubman, right? But Malcolm X was one of lots of people who was very important too. And Malcolm X didn't really like what Martin Luther King did with the Children's March. He said, "Real men don't put their children on the firing line." I think what he meant was that even though kids are the bravest people on the whole entire planet, grown-ups shouldn't just wait for you to do things that we're too scared to do.

Even though I love this story, and even though it helps me to have faith, I don't know if I agree with what Malcolm X said or with what Dr. Martin Luther King did. I wanted to decide before I told you about it all, but I guess I couldn't. I love what the kids did, but I do think grown-ups should be brave too.

I think we need to be just as brave as this world we've made asks you to be.

## Appendix B: Post-Show Workshop Plans

### NOTES

As I noted in Chapter Three, this Appendix contains preliminary ideas regarding how workshops for audience members who watched *Conversation with an Apple* might unfold. I've yet to sketch out, in detail, exactly how long each activity listed on the agenda might take, when and how breaks should take place, and in many instances have not crafted facilitation questions with the level of precision I usually would when writing curriculum. I intend this document to articulate how I imagine these workshops might build upon audience experiences while viewing *Conversation with an Apple*; however, it is a work in progress.

### GOALS

- Participants will know...
  - How root ideologies and societal institutions create and perpetuate mass incarceration
  - Diverse strategies for contributing to movement-building against mass incarceration and in support of education justice
- Participants will be able to...
  - Explain how mass incarceration functions
  - Articulate audacious hopes and dreams for a radically different future
  - Explain how movements are built
  - Practice strategies for contributing to movement-building against mass incarceration and in support of education justice
- Participants will appreciate...
  - That together, they have the power to build a movement to stop mass incarceration



## **AGENDA**

### **Poster Dialogue**

Source: *Drama-Based Instruction Network* by Drama for Schools

As participants enter the space, they receive markers and have the opportunity to respond in writing to a number of prompts written on posters hung on the walls throughout the room:

- One moment in the play *Conversation with an Apple* that I related to was...
- I decided to participate in this workshop/these workshops because...
- One thing I hope to get out of this experience is...

### **Community-Building**

Source: “Warm-Ups,” *Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue* by Michael Rohd

Participants will begin by engaging in active ice-breaker games and activities meant to encourage them to laugh and play together, to get to know one another, to build trust, and to practice working together. After this sequence of activities, we will verbally review the responses recorded during our Poster Dialogue, noting similarities and differences.

### **Image Theatre**

Source: *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* by Augusto Boal

The facilitator will ask participants to play the “statue game” again, this time representing how they felt after viewing *Conversation with an Apple*. The facilitator will ask half of the group to stay frozen while the other half of the group looks at their statues/images, and then ask that group to relax so that they can view the other half of the group’s statues/images. The facilitator will ask what similarities and differences participants observed. The facilitator may also ask participants to “try on” other people’s statues/images, so that they might have an opportunity to, however briefly, try on someone else’s experience of the play on for size. The facilitator might ask participants to reflect aloud on that experience.

## **The Roots and Fruits of Systemic Oppression**

Source: Matthew Gossage, Texans United for Families, Houston/Austin Retreat: Shut Down Polk

The facilitator will draw a large outline of a tree on a blackboard or other large writing surface. The facilitator will explain that this tree represents systems of oppression we saw at work in *Conversation with an Apple*. The leaves and/or fruits represent everyday manifestations of oppression, such as Ms. Eden having so many students in her class that she does not feel she can serve each of them adequately, or her school's "all-grey walls" policy that stifles her and her students' radical and creative voices, or "three strikes" policies that punish students for alleged offenses that do not actually harm anyone. The trunk represents institutions that perpetuate systems of oppression, such as Ms. Eden's school. The roots represent larger ideological causes that perpetuate these systems, such as racism.

The facilitator will ask participants to write, on small post-its, examples from the play of leaves/fruits of oppression, the trunk or institutions that perpetuate it, and its ideological roots. Participants can do this individually, in pairs, or in small groups.

After placing the participants' responses on the tree, the facilitator will guide the group in identifying themes, patterns, and outliers. The facilitator will help the group identify institutions and ideologies that they want to learn more about in order to more deeply understand the causes of the conditions we saw in *Conversation with an Apple*, and that we hopefully identified as realistic in our Poster Dialogue. The facilitator helps divide the group into smaller break-out groups, each of which will investigate one part of the "tree" they want to know more about.

### **Research in Break-Out Groups**

In break-out groups, participants will research institutions, systems, and ideologies identified earlier that they want to know more about. They might view documentaries such as:

- *Race: The Power of an Illusion*
- *The House I Live In*

- *Punishment and Profits*
- *The School to Prison Pipeline*

### **Teach-In**

Break-out groups will teach one another about what they've just learned through their research, and each small group will take turns facilitating a discussion in which the rest of the participants add additional post-its to the tree diagram.

### **Real to Ideal**

Source: *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* by Augusto Boal

In small groups, participants create frozen tableaux representing the leaves/fruits of oppression we've identified together. Small groups share these tableaux with one another, and look for ways to make the trunk/institutions and ideological roots visible in these tableaux as well.

The facilitator asks the entire group to gather in a large circle. S/he asks a few participants to try creating a frozen tableau of the kind of world we want to bring into existence for young people instead, to replace the one we've been researching. The facilitator tells participants in the large circle that they can silently, one at a time, "tap in" for people in the middle, and replace them in order to represent a different idea. We may have different ideas about what our "ideal" would look like, so this is an opportunity to share those ideas nonverbally. Participants make tableaux until the group seems to settle on one they all like; or, if that happens very quickly, the facilitator encourages them to try creating more "ideal" options. If participants can't seem to agree on one "ideal" image, the facilitator simply pauses the activity and asks for participants' help identifying points of unity, while not denying points about which we may disagree.

## **Gallery Walk: What's Worked?**

Source: Catalina Nieto, Detention Watch Network, Houston/Austin Retreat: Shut Down Polk

The facilitator invites participants to walk to a space in which s/he has printed and posted a number of “case studies” that tell stories of what’s worked in various communities who have organized against mass incarceration, the school-to-prison pipeline, and for education justice. As participants walk through the “gallery,” the facilitator will ask them to make notes about similarities, differences, and anything else that stands out to them about these case studies. *Beautiful Trouble* and *Building a Movement to End the New Jim Crow* contain a number of case studies, tactics, principles, and theories that facilitators could highlight in this activity. Texts about restorative justice in and outside of schools or about liberatory pedagogy could also be instructive here. After all participants have had a chance to walk the gallery and make notes, the facilitator designates a place where those notes can be compiled, and guides a discussion about what participants learned, and what stood out to them.

## **Asset-Mapping**

Source: “Community Cultural Development and Youth: Leveraging Diversities as Social Assets” by Stephani Etheridge Woodson

The facilitator will ask the group to graphically represent the assets present in the room today. The facilitator will ask participants to do this first by drawing pictures that represent the assets they bring, and then by adding on to other people’s pictures, graphically representing assets they believe that other people in the group bring. These assets can include any and everything the group deems relevant. Examples could include public speaking skills, creativity, strong relationships with students, strong relationships with faith communities, money, free time, a large living room where meetings might be held, commitment, courage, love, etc.

## **The Machine**

Sources: *Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue* by Michael Rohd

### *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* by Augusto Boal

The facilitator will ask participants to remember the “real” images they created earlier. The facilitator will explain that we are going to bring some of these images together, and add repetitive movement and sounds and/or phrases that will help to illustrate how the different components of the school-to-prison pipeline/mass incarceration “machine” fit together. The facilitator might have participants create a neutral or just silly machine first as a warm-up. The facilitator might also model that a school-to-prison pipeline/mass incarceration machine might include some elements from *Conversation with an Apple*, for example: an administrator repeatedly wagging their finger and scolding, “You’ve got to set limits with these kids” at a teacher; while the teacher repeats “Three strikes, you’re out” to a student; who is repeatedly looking down, shaking their head, and saying “If they want to kick me out, I’ll just leave on my OWN terms.” When participants are ready, the facilitator will invite them to begin creating the school-to-prison pipeline/mass incarceration machine together. The facilitator will encourage participants to build a machine that represents the complexity of the analysis the group has developed together as they’ve completed research and elaborated on their tree. The group may eventually, for instance, add representations of the media and its stereotypical depictions of young people of color, or representations of the political apparatus that makes policy, and of the wealthy donors who influence them through campaign donations, lobbying groups, etc.

### **Monkeywrenches in the Machine**

Source: Original, Natalie Goodnow at Houston/Austin Retreat: Shut Down Polk and other Texans United for Families, Austin Immigrant Rights Coalition meetings and public actions

When the oppressive machine appears complete, or when the group feels sick of watching it at work, the facilitator will urge participants to begin to insert “monkeywrenches” in the machine, hopefully inspired by the case studies they learned about in their Gallery Walk. Participants might, for example, insert a teacher in the machine who says to the administrator described above, “What do you mean by ‘these kids’?”; and/or an alternative media source that

represents young people of color in more nuanced, truthful, and positive ways; and/or a group protesting potential legislative decisions. The facilitator will guide a reflective discussion on what it felt like to “throw monkeywrenches” in the machine, and on what happened to the machine after multiple interventions began to accumulate. Hopefully participants will see and feel that many small “monkeywrenches,” when thrown in all at once and in many different locations, can slow down and eventually break even large, complex, and terrifying machines.

### **Rehearsal for the Revolution**

Source: Original, Natalie Goodnow, based upon common practices in Theatre of the Oppressed, direct action training, and theatre education

The facilitator will guide participants in identifying a few miniature “scenes” from what they’ve just witnessed that they want to “zoom in” on. For instance, participants might choose to focus on the short scene between two teachers and an administrator, in which the administrator says, “You’ve got to set limits with these kids,” and a teacher steps in to say, “What do you mean by ‘these kids?’” Next, interested participants will have an opportunity to “rehearse for the revolution,” as Augusto Boal would say, in more detail. Participants can try improvising how they think this two-line scene would go on if it were to continue, and try out different strategies for talking to the administrator and/or otherwise intervening, in an adaptation of Boal’s Forum Theatre. If participants are interested in a number of different components of the machine they built earlier, they could complete this activity in break-out groups. One group might focus on the scene with the administrator, for instance, while another creates a speech, a song, or a play about all that young people have to offer society (as opposed to the dominant media narrative), and while another practices civil disobedience tactics for protest of proposed legislation.

### **Affinity Groups**

Source: Original, Natalie Goodnow, based on common practices in community organizing

The facilitator invites participants to form affinity groups, groups of people with whom they will continue to meet to plan, implement, and evaluate some of the ideas they tried out here.

These affinity groups might emerge organically from break-out groups focusing on different components of the school-to-prison pipeline/mass incarceration machine. The facilitator will encourage participants to exchange contact information with the other members of their affinity group, to choose a place and time when they will meet next, and to designate one person who will be responsible for reminding everyone to come to that next meeting. Time permitting, the group might also identify one to three goals for their next meeting.

### **Tomorrow I Will...**

Source: Drama for Schools, Activating Learning through the Arts Summer Institute 2014

The facilitator asks participants to gather in a circle and take turns sharing one thing they will do today, inspired by this workshop.

### **Closing Ritual**

Source: Dave Kalloor, Houston/Austin Retreat: Shut Down Polk

The facilitator asks for volunteers to read the following quote aloud:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

- Howard Zinn  
(*A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*, 270)

## **Evaluation**

Source: Inspired by the University of Texas at Austin Voices Against Violence Theatre for Dialogue programs' evaluation model in which audience members submit an email address and receive surveys immediately after and several weeks after participating in a session

Ideally, participants would complete an evaluation of this series of workshops immediately after they end, one month afterwards, three months afterwards, and perhaps even six months afterwards. Evaluations could attempt to measure if and how this experience contributed to participants' developing the knowledge, skills, and willingness necessary to contribute to movement-building against mass incarceration in a sustainable way.



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## Vita

Natalie Marlena Goodnow is a nationally recognized theatre-maker and teaching artist from Austin, Texas who creates and directs activist performances for stages, streets, and classrooms. Her solo play *Mud Offerings* was the 2011 winner of the Jane Chambers Playwriting Award for feminist plays and performance texts and has been presented nationally at festivals and conferences in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Washington D.C., and throughout Texas. She recently began collaborating with Grassroots Leadership, Texans United for Families, and the Austin Immigrant Rights Coalition to create street performances and interactive drama-based workshops in support of their campaigns for human rights. Goodnow has worked as a teaching artist since 2007, exploring critical social issues with young people through drama and the arts, and now shares arts-based dialogue techniques with teaching artists and schoolteachers as well. She holds a B.A. from Southwestern University where she majored in Theatre and minored in Spanish and Feminist Studies, and a M.F.A. in Performance as Public Practice from the University of Texas at Austin.

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